

ETHICAL (IN)DIFFERENCE IN SELF AND TEXT  
IN GRACQ, BEN JELLOUN AND GERMAIN

By

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My study examines why Julien Gracq's *Un Balcon en forêt* (1958), Tahar Ben Jelloun's *La Nuit sacrée* (1987) and Sylvie Germain *Opéra muet* (1989), three disparate novels in French, display similarly ambiguous language, imagery and plots in their depictions of depressed, indifferent protagonists. Indeed, such language and themes could easily be construed as meaningless textual play, typical, as some allege, of much (post)modern literature. However, my dissertation argues that, in these three novels, textual indeterminacy and the focus on the melancholic, ambivalent self reveal, in fact, the practice and thematization of an ethical opening to the other in its variant forms.

All three novels exemplify texts in difference where textual ambiguities highlight both meaning and its negation or disruption which, in turn, reflect the analogous struggle in the speaking, writing and/or reading subject. To the extent that these indeterminate literary texts underscore not only narcissistic identity but the unconscious other as well, and, in so doing, acknowledge the split self, rather than suppress it, ethics, as Julia Kristeva defines it, inheres in these works.

Moreover, the texts offer meditations on the *self in difference* in their portrayals of characters who not only (re)discover their divided psyche but also learn to respect the human other's alterity. Each narrative fiction presents the protagonist's path to ethical becoming, that is, to appreciating the internal and external ineffable other, as a complex process, ranging from violent, narcissistic rejection to joyful acceptance by way of play or aesthetic activity, with interim moments of melancholia.

Analyzing the ambivalent self and the ambiguous, poetic text in three disparate novels while using varied theoretical approaches, including those of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Emmanuel Levinas, my project highlights the fruitful consideration of difference at all levels. Indeed, the choice of novels for this dissertation, written

during different historical moments, by male and female as well as French and other Francophone authors, underscores the study of difference within and between these works and, subsequently, questions the discipline's inclination to compartmentalize the study of literature in French.

CHAPTER 1  
(IN)DIFFERENCE IN SELF AND TEXT

The poststructuralist critique of metaphysics, identity, meaning, and truth has undergone incessant, heavy criticism for its lack of social and ethical value. Indeed, poststructuralist theory, as well as postmodern art which instantiates such theory,<sup>1</sup> take as their focus indecision, deferral, and ambiguity in notions of self and text which critics denounce as nihilistic and anarchical. For many, the constant play of self-reflective language in poststructuralist thought precludes the representation of

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<sup>1</sup>In *An Introductory Guide To Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Madan Sarup defines poststructuralism as the theoretical approach that continues many of the critiques already present in structuralism, such as the critiques of the subject, of historicism and of philosophy, but that "reject[s] the assumptions implicit in the Saussurian model of linguistics on which structuralism was based" (130). "Postmodernism," Sarup goes on to say, "is in part a description of a new type of society [i.e., the post-industrialist society since the Second World War] but also, in part, a new term for post-structuralism in the arts" (133). Sarup further notes how these two terms tend to conflate. "In my opinion post-structuralists like Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard are postmodernists. There are so many similarities between post-structuralist theories and postmodern practices that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between them" (144).

ethical and social concerns.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, this type of theory and art, the detractors allege, occupies a position of indifference that "leads to moral and political nihilism" (Sarup 186). Arthur Kroker's *The Postmodern Scene:*

*Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* depicts postmodernist theory and culture as signaling the end of an ethical society or, as he puts it, as "a melancholy descent into the violence of the death of the social" (9). Kroker repeatedly proclaims that postmodernism's ethic-less practice displays a "loss of solidarity" (13), thereby inflicting a postmodern "deep sense of melancholia" (13).

But how did poststructuralists and/or postmodernists come to be associated with this so-called "melancholic" theoretic and aesthetic stance, seemingly bereft of all social and ethical considerations? Geoffrey Galt Harpham offers a provocative explanation in his essay "Ethics" which traces the dynamics between ethics, theory, and literature starting with the emergence of the "Theoretical Era" circa 1968 and continuing up to the present. Harpham contends that ethics, for the majority of poststructuralist

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<sup>2</sup>In *The Rhetoric of Failure*, Ewa Ziarek discusses the common misinterpretation of contemporary art's play with language. She states, the effects of the rhetorical subversion of meaning can be misread as the infinite play of self-reflective language, separated from the tasks of representation and social obligations" (4).

theorists, became equated with "power, hypocrisy, and unreality" (Harpham 387). These theorists perceived "the ethical imperative" or "the moral law" as the pretense under which the Enlightenment's "universal subject" or "subject of humanism" acted according to his own interests.

According to this account, whenever someone claimed to be acting on 'the ethical imperative' or 'moral law,' they were in fact rendering mystical and grand their own private interests or desires. Making claims of this sort, one might even persuade oneself that one's interests were somehow globally necessary: ethics could be the particular way in which people preserved a good conscience while overriding or delegitimizing the claims of others (Harpham 387).

Yet the poststructuralist/postmodernist rejection of the Enlightenment's prejudicial moral law does not imply a total repudiation of the notion of ethics as some critics may claim. It is the prejudicial aspect, the exclusion of the other and of alterity in general that many poststructuralists oppose in the humanist definition of morality and not the idea of ethics itself. In fact, theorists like Levinas,<sup>3</sup> Derrida, Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva uphold notions of ethics that explore, respect, and even embrace the other, not only the other in intersubjective relations but within the self as well as

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<sup>3</sup>Although Levinas has never referred to himself as postmodern, many, nevertheless, consider his work to be postmodern. For instance, Zygmunt Bauman writes more than once in *Postmodern Ethics* that "Lévinas's is the postmodern ethics" (84).

within language; these poststructuralist thinkers all espouse, each in their own distinct manner, an ethics of difference. The ambiguity, indecision, and deferral of meaning characteristic of poststructuralist practice can be seen to constitute an ethical exploration of non-meaning, that is, of the otherness in language as well as of the alterity within the self and not, as critics may argue, an indifferent, nihilistic play with language.

Indeed, given the poststructuralist claim that language constitutes the self<sup>4</sup> and, therefore, that textuality is analogous to subjectivity,<sup>5</sup> the acknowledgement of alterity (non-meaning) in language also intimates an openness--either

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<sup>4</sup>Poststructuralists tend to follow Émile Benveniste's innovative concept that subjectivity is constructed through language. Indeed, many point to Benveniste as the first to depict the linguistic construction of the discontinuous subject. In *Problèmes de la linguistique générale, Tome 1*, Benveniste writes,

C'est dans et par le langage que l'homme se constitue comme sujet; parce que le langage seul fonde en réalité, dans sa réalité qui est celle de l'être, le concept d'ego'. La 'subjectivité' dont nous traitons ici est la capacité du locuteur à se poser comme 'sujet'. . . . [N]ous tenons que cette 'subjectivité', qu'on la pose en phénoménologie ou en psychologie, comme on voudra, n'est que l'émergence dans l'être d'une propriété fondamentale du langage. Est 'ego' qui dit 'ego'. Nous trouvons là le fondement de la 'subjectivité', qui se détermine par le statut linguistique de la 'personne' (259-60).

<sup>5</sup>In *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, Peter Brooks states, "the study of human fiction-making and psychic processes are convergent activities, and superimposable forms of analysis" (36).



passive or active--to otherness in self, which psychoanalysis defines as the unconscious. In light of this poststructuralist-psychoanalytic intertwining of textuality and subjectivity, my analysis of the text converges with my consideration of the self throughout this dissertation. More specifically, following Julia Kristeva's analogy between avant-garde or postmodern texts and the divided self posited by psychoanalysis, I equate textual ambiguity with subjective ambivalence. Despite the difference in meaning between *ambiguity* and *ambivalence*,<sup>6</sup> I focus on the words' corresponding allusion to a state of indeterminacy. In so doing, I examine not only how the *ambiguity* of the text is comparable to the *ambivalence* of the self, but, more importantly, how the (post)modern self's and text's similar indecision reveals their analogous ethical dimension. I argue then that the text's and self's respective ambiguity and ambivalence, that is, their state of difference, display their openness to textual and psychic otherness and, in turn, to the external other's alterity, all of which I refer

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<sup>6</sup>While *ambiguity* refers to "an instance of double meaning" or "an expression with more than one meaning" (*OED* 64), *ambivalence*, which has a more psychological connotation, is "the simultaneous existence of contradictory tendencies, attitudes or feelings in the relationship to a single object--especially the coexistence of love and hate" (Laplanche and Pontalis 26).

to as the text's and self's ethical inclusion of and respect for the other.

The three novels that I have chosen to analyze in this dissertation, all of which date from the latter half of the twentieth century, illustrate both the (post)modern ethical text and self in difference. Not only do these fictional works exemplify textual ambiguity, but they also thematize the ambivalent process of self-formation. The ongoing undecidability in character, plot, imagery, and language in Julien Gracq's *Un Balcon en forêt*, Tahar Ben Jelloun's *La Nuit sacrée*, and Sylvie Germain's *Opéra muet*, which, at first reading, might appear to be narratives of melancholic indifference, points to a state of ambivalence and ambiguity--at both the thematic and textual levels--that presents, on the contrary, an ethical quest for and appreciation of difference. At the same time, however, all three novels thematize and evoke a persistent sense of deep sadness and suffering. Thus, Kroker's claim that postmodern culture is melancholic seems valid with regard to these three novels. But the melancholia conveyed in these texts does not result from a lack of ethics, as Kroker understands it. Rather, quite to the contrary, I argue that the melancholia presented in the novels' theme, character, and tonality is an integral part of the process of

differentiation between self and other(ness), or rather of an ethics of difference. Each of the novels figures a melancholic subject which painfully abstains from the narcissistic, exhilarating practice of defining and thus internalizing difference into the selfsame. Although becoming a possible dimension of the incipient ethical self, melancholic distress, nevertheless, continues to pose the threat of (psychic) death. However, as thematized in the three novels, melancholia may ultimately be overcome or worked through by revolutionary aesthetic activity or linguistic play. Indeed, the shift from melancholic despair to pleasure in the encounter with the other occurs through textual play which thus inscribes a respect for other-ness.

Focusing primarily on the writings by Kristeva, this chapter first underscores the ethical value both of the text's double language, consisting of meaning and of non-meaning, as well as of the subject's internal oscillations between identity and alterity. I next explore how aesthetic activity, specifically, writing and reading texts that practice and thematize indeterminacy, awakens the reader and writer of difference. While underlining the changing, fragmented self and text, this chapter nevertheless also takes into consideration the narcissistic aspects inherent in subjectivity and textuality. I suggest that Kristeva's notion of "negative narcissism" or "melancholia," in

particular, despite exposing the painful traces of the narcissistic longing for comforting sameness, nevertheless helps account for ethical indeterminacy in self/text-construction.

To generate a fruitful discussion on subjectivity, aesthetic activity, ethics, and melancholia, in this opening chapter, I analyze Kristeva's extensive work on these issues, and, to a lesser degree, Emmanuel Levinas's and Hélène Cixous's unique discussions of similar questions concerning ethics, otherness, self, and the creative process. Highlighting some similarities and distinctions between Kristeva's definition of ethics and that of Levinas—who is one of the foremost thinkers of an ethics of the other—may help shed new light on Kristeva's writings. I examine a couple of Cixous's essays, on the other hand, to the extent that they share Kristeva's perspective on ethical reading and writing. Moreover, given that Cixous frames her analysis of ethical relations and of narcissism solely within sexual difference, her work adds a stimulating dimension to my discussion of these subjects and, concomitantly, to my reading of the three novels. Indeed, the findings in this first chapter provide the theoretical tools with which I will study, in the three subsequent chapters, each novel's presentation of ambivalence and/or ambiguity, of melancholia, and of aesthetic play as

essential aspects of the ethical self and text in difference. Following Kristeva who first broaches the subject of ethics, ambivalence, and ambiguity in her analysis of the avant-garde text in *La Révolution du langage poétique*, I, too, begin by discussing the avant-garde as well as the postmodern text, both of which, in light of Kristeva's writings, I refer to as the "revolutionary" text.

### The Revolutionary Text In Difference

Always concerned with the notion of ethics but from a "perspective nouvelle" different from that of the "humanisme moraliste" (*Révolution* 203), which, she ironically remarks, is heavily indebted to "l'autorité paternelle et divine" (*Étrangers à nous-mêmes* 285), Kristeva points out that the present consensus on the definition of ethics is the disruption of the past perspective.

N'étant plus une habitude coercitive assurant la cohérence d'un groupe à travers la répétition d'un code, d'un discours plus ou moins accepté, la question de l'éthique surgit désormais au lieu où le code (les mœurs, le contrat social) doit se briser pour laisser place au jeu de la négativité, du besoin, du désir, du plaisir, de la jouissance, avant de se refaire, mais provisoirement et en connaissance de cause ("Éthique de la linguistique" 357).

Recent notions of ethics then concern the disruption of conventions that sustain a homogeneous society, but, in order to do so, this new type of ethics involves the

uncovering of otherness or of "negativity" in all such social "codes" or systems, which include language and, concomitantly, the subject. Postponing her examination of an ethics between self and other for later writings, Kristeva first defines the ethical practice, in her earlier essays, as the process whereby the speaking and/or writing subject becomes aware of and even explores or plays with alterity or non-meaning in language. Since Kristeva, like most contemporary thinkers, upholds the poststructuralist notion that language "determines" the human subject,<sup>7</sup> she likens this otherness ("negativity") in language to the other within the self. It follows then that as the subject discerns linguistic alterity or non-meaning, he or she also explores the sense of difference, i.e., the unconscious, within the self. Thus, for Kristeva, an ethical practice involves the unveiling of the other, that is, "another signifying scene" (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 293) which refers to both the negativity within language as well as the resurfacing of the unconscious within the subject. However,

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<sup>7</sup>In her essay "Postmodernism?", Kristeva declares her unequivocal espousal of poststructuralism's claim that the self is constituted through language.

[T]hose sciences dealing with the symbolic capabilities (linguistics, semiology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology), as well as bioneurological research, have clearly demonstrated that the position of language within human experience is determinant but fragile (136).

in Kristeva's definition, an ethical practice does not solely entail an uncontrolled play with linguistic and psychic otherness. She explains that this free play with negativity would only lead to meaningless gibberish and psychosis, thereby corroborating the critics' view of postmodern practices as purely nihilistic. In order to preclude textual and psychic chaos, the ethical practice, she argues, must also include instances of meaning and identity.

According to Kristeva, psychoanalysis and avant-garde as well as postmodern literature are three such ethical practices wherein the analysand's or writer's poetic language, which alternates between, on the one hand, logical, grammatical structures, meaning and representation and, on the other hand, rhythm, alliterations, silences, and ellipses, brings to light the heterogeneity of the self. Indeed, this kind of poetic language evinces Kristeva's notion of the "sujet-en-procès" oscillating between the two modalities that structure it: "le symbolique," which is the subject's internalization of the Symbolic Law or the social order that leads to a sense of identity, and "le sémiotique," which consists of "frayages, transports d'énergie, découpage du continuum corporel, social, aussi bien que de celui du matériau signifiant, établissement

d'une distinctivité" (*Révolution* 40). In alluding to and celebrating this otherness or "le sémiotique" in language, revolutionary writing challenges the conventional valorization of rational, linear language or texts that always communicate a clear, singular meaning or message. Moreover, to the extent that such poetic language intimates the unconscious other, this type of language defies, in particular, the Cartesian definition of the human subject as embodying an exclusively rational, stable, and unified identity who, as Kristeva notes in *La Révolution du langage poétique*, in order to maintain such imaginary unity, narcissistically rejects alterity by appropriating the other into the selfsame.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, by bringing to light the other in text and self, revolutionary writings question stable meaning and identity, that is, the fixed, accepted notions of language and of subjectivity, which Kristeva condemns as "narcissistic." Kristeva refers to the disruption of rational, meaningful language, which preserves the narcissistic self, as an "ethical practice" in *La Révolution du langage poétique*

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<sup>8</sup>In *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Kristeva denounces the Cartesian subject's narcissistic tendencies. The Cartesian subject is, she writes, a "sujet indifférent" whose "destinataire est donc une totalité indifférenciée" (*Révolution* 91). See the section "Narcissism and the Ethical Self" in this chapter for a more in-depth analysis of Kristeva's critique of the subject of humanism.



wherein she discusses at length "la question concernant la fonction éthique du texte ou plus généralement de l'art" (203).

[C]ette question ne peut se re-poser que dans une perspective nouvelle qui prenne en considération le procès du sujet dans le langage ou plus généralement dans le sens. Nous entendrons par *éthique* la négativation du narcissisme dans une *pratique*; autrement dit, est éthique une pratique qui dissout les fixations narcissiques (étroitement subjectales) auxquelles succombe le procès signifiant dans son effectuation socio-linguistique. La pratique telle que nous l'avons définie posant-dissolvant le sens et l'unité du sujet, recouvre ce que nous venons de dire de l'éthique. On comprend alors que le texte qui, dans sa disposition signifiante et dans sa signification, est une pratique assumant toute positivité pour la négativer et pour faire ainsi apparaître le procès qui la sous-tend, est précisément ce qui réalise l'exigence éthique (203).

Avant-garde and postmodern poetic texts are a kind of contradictory "practice" which works from within conventional notions of meaning (*sens*) in language or of identity in self-formation in order to destabilize these concepts of text and of self. Indeed, for Kristeva, textuality is the simultaneous presentation of meaning and of its negation, of the social contract and of its other, of the symbolic and of the semiotic which alludes to the analogous struggle that is generally repressed within the writing/speaking subject. To the extent that ambiguous literary texts highlight not just the narcissistic identity but the unconscious other as well, and, in so doing,

acknowledge the split self, rather than suppress it, ethics, in its Kristevan sense of textual practice, inheres in these works.

Moreover, as poetic works bring to light the subject's ephemeral flashes of otherness through a double language, these revolutionary texts open up the Symbolic Law or social contract to instances of alterity and thereby potentially effect its change. The "ethical function" of such writing, which Kristeva identifies not only in modern, avant-garde literature but in contemporary, postmodern novels as well, is therefore this writing's "attempts to expand the limits of the signifiable, that is, to expand the boundaries of human experience through the realignment of its characteristic element, language" ("Postmodernism?" 137). She then adds, "[l]et us say that postmodernism is the literature which writes itself with the more or less conscious intention of expanding the signifiable and thus human realm" ("Postmodernism?" 137).

### The Self In and Respectful of Difference

Subsequent to disrupting the narcissistic self and to "shattering" temporarily the social code in order to revolutionize it, creative activity instigates ethical relations. Before discussing aesthetic activity's role in

promoting a subject who respects the other's difference, I first consider what an ethical self entails by examining Kristeva's notions as well as some of Levinas's ideas.

In his essay "La Réalité et son ombre," Levinas depicts the divided subject as split between being or identity and its "stranger."

L'être n'est pas seulement lui-même, il s'échappe. Voici une personne qui est ce qu'elle est; mais elle ne fait pas oublier, n'absorbe pas, ne recouvre pas entièrement les objets qu'elle tient et la manière dont elle les tient, ses gestes, ses membres, son regard, sa pensée, sa peau, qui s'échappent de sous l'identité de sa substance, incapable, comme un sac troué, de les contenir. Et c'est ainsi que la personne porte sur sa face, à côté de son être avec lequel elle coïncide, sa propre caricature, son pittoresque. . . . Il y a donc dans cette personne, dans cette chose une dualité dans son être. Elle est ce qu'elle est et elle est étrangère à elle-même ("La Réalité et son ombre" 778).

Kristeva similarly refers to this notion of a "stranger" within the self but in a more psychoanalytic context. Evidently playing on the root *étrange* shared by *étranger* and *étrangeté*, she identifies this internal "stranger" with Freud's "unconscious" whose resurfacings Freud describes as the uncanny or the "inquiétante étrangeté."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>See Freud's essay "The Uncanny" in *On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers On the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion* in which Freud defines the uncanny or *das unheimliche* as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (123-24); "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (148). But, as Freud later goes on to explain,

Avec la notion freudienne d'inconscient, l'involution de l'étrange dans le psychisme perd son aspect pathologique et intègre au sein de l'unité présumée des hommes une *altérité* à la fois biologique et symbolique, qui devient partie intégrante du *même*. . . Inquiétante, l'étrangeté est en nous: nous sommes nos propres étrangers--nous sommes divisés (*Etrangers à nous-mêmes* 268).

However, both Levinas and Kristeva do not limit their connotations of "l'étranger" to an internal strangeness; they also employ the term to designate the external other, thereby recognizing the other as *other*, as different, as one who, like the *foreigner* (l'étranger), embodies a mysterious and surprising alterity. In fact, Kristeva continually plays with the double connotation of *étranger* in (as her title exemplifies) *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, wherein she posits the acknowledgement of the internal stranger as the path towards peaceful, ethical relations with the external stranger. Otherwise stated, in recognizing l'étrangeté within, we more easily embrace l'étrangeté de l'étranger.<sup>10</sup>

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these uncanny feelings resurface from the unconscious from time to time "when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to have been confirmed" (157).

<sup>10</sup>Indeed, Kristeva interprets Freud's discussion of the uncanny in his essay "The Uncanny" to be an indirect call for ethical attitudes towards strangers or foreigners. Towards the end of *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, Kristeva writes, *Délicatement, analytiquement, Freud ne parle pas des étrangers: il nous apprend à détecter l'étrangeté en nous. C'est peut-être la seule manière de ne pas la traquer dehors. Au cosmopolitisme stoïcien, à*

Specifically, as a reaction to an increase in racial and ethnic tensions in Europe during the last two decades, in *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, Kristeva champions tolerance for the foreigner or immigrant other by offering a means to attain and maintain an ethical openness to difference both inside and outside the self, a process which she names "l'éthique de la psychanalyse" (284).

Mon malaise à vivre avec l'autre--mon étrangeté, son étrangeté--repose sur une logique troublée réglant ce faisceau étrange de pulsion et de langage, de nature et de symbole qu'est l'inconscient toujours déjà formé par l'autre. C'est de dénouer le transfert--dynamique majeure de l'altérité, de l'amour/haine pour l'autre, de l'étrangeté constitutive de notre psychisme--qu'à partir de l'autre je me réconcilie avec ma propre altérité-étrangeté, que j'en joue et que j'en vis. La psychanalyse s'éprouve alors comme un voyage dans l'étrangeté de l'autre et de soi-même, vers une éthique du respect pour l'inconciliable. Comment pourrait-on tolérer un étranger si l'on ne se sait pas étranger à soi-même? Et dire qu'il a fallu si longtemps pour que cette petite vérité transversale, voire rebelle à

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l'intégration universaliste religieuse, succède chez Freud le courage de nous dire désintégrés pour ne pas intégrer les étrangers et encore moins les poursuivre, mais pour les accueillir dans cette inquiétante étrangeté qui est autant la leur que la nôtre. En fait, cette distraction freudienne à l'égard du 'problème des étrangers'--lequel n'apparaît qu'en éclipse ou, si l'on préfère, en symptôme, par le rappel du terme grec *xenoi*--pourrait être interprétée comme une invitation (utopique ou très moderne?) à ne pas réifier l'étranger, à ne pas le fixer comme tel, à ne pas nous fixer comme tels. . . . L'étrange est en moi, donc nous sommes tous des étrangers. Si je suis étranger, il n'y a pas d'étrangers. Aussi Freud n'en parle-t-il pas. L'éthique de la psychanalyse implique une politique" (283-84).

l'uniformisme religieux, éclaire les hommes de notre temps! (269)

In the psychoanalytic relationship, the analyst's difference instigates the analysand's reconciliation with his or her own sense of strangeness. In other words, the analysand recognizes his or her potentially threatening ambivalent feelings of love/hate, of attraction/rejection towards the different, ungraspable other. Once having become reconciled with his or her internal strangeness, the analysand embraces the other's difference, and, in so doing, avoids any violent urges. Thus, what impels us to discover our otherness within and subsequently accept the external other's strangeness, thereby enabling us to become ethical, is, paradoxically, the exciting yet disconcerting experience of the other's difference. The effort to become aware of our own *étrangeté* which represents the core of an "ethics of psychoanalysis" or an ethics of difference is then, from Kristeva's perspective, a conscious endeavor and not an inherent reaction to some universal law.

Framing her notion of ethical relations between self and other in a discussion of the historical and contemporary perceptions of foreigners, Kristeva notes how the foreigners' more obvious differences heighten that ambivalent, "uncanny" feeling, and bring to light "la

manière secrète que nous avons d'envisager le monde"

(*Etrangers* 12).

[C]e visage si autre porte la marque d'un seuil franchi qui s'imprime irrémédiablement dans un apaisement ou une inquiétude. Qu'elle soit troublée ou joyeuse, l'expression de l'étranger signale qu'il est 'en outre'. La présence d'une telle frontière interne à tout ce qui se montre réveille nos sens les plus archaïques par un goût de brûlure. Souci ou ravissement brûlés, déposés là dans ces traits autres, sans oublier et sans ostentation, comme une invitation permanente à quelque voyage inaccessible, irritant, dont l'étranger n'a pas le code mais dont il garde la mémoire muette, physique, visible (*Etrangers* 12-13).

Thus, ethical awakening, Kristeva insists, involves an active process or psychic battle between attraction towards and rejection of the other, which is, otherwise stated, a working through of the uncanny triggered by the other. Unlike Kristeva's depiction of the subject's internal conflict which easily risks transforming into aggression against others, Levinas holds that the subject's reaction to the foreigner's strange face involves a peaceful sense of wonder which lacks feelings of violence. Levinas describes the subject's encounter with the "face of the other" as a moment when the self instantly acknowledges the ineffable quality of the other, the impenetrability of the "face of the other," and, as a result, passively accepts an overwhelming sense of responsibility towards the other. Not having chosen or consented to this need to care for the other, this ethical obligation towards the other is, Levinas

alleges, "imposed" upon the subject. The ethical subject, in Levinas's eyes, does not experience the uncanny fear and concomitant rejection of the other, as posited by Kristeva, but rather an immediate sense of care and solidarity for the other. "La présence du visage venant d'au-delà du monde, mais m'engageant dans la fraternité humaine, ne m'écrase pas comme une essence numineuse qui fait trembler et se fait craindre" (*Totalité et infini* 236).

Perhaps the differences between Kristeva's and Levinas's perspectives on the self's initial reaction to the other's strange face stems from where they situate this unrepresentable alterity. In calling the other *l'étranger*, Levinas implies a third meaning to this term, in addition to the two other connotations previously considered (i.e., (1) internal strangeness and (2) the foreigner); he employs the geographic meaning of *étranger* which, in French, is "foreign land" or "abroad"<sup>11</sup> and whose sense of mystery and distance

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<sup>11</sup>Peperzak notes that a double connotation of "l'étranger" in Levinas's work becomes most apparent in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* wherein "vers l'étranger" (167) which is usually interpreted and translated simply as "stranger" is immediately followed by the synonymous "vers là-bas" thereby underscoring the often ignored meaning of "abroad." Lévinas again and again insists on the fact that truth comes from the outside, from afar and abroad. *L'étranger* has two meanings and is intentionally ambiguous; it expresses simultaneously the foreign country from which the truth comes to me and the stranger who knocks at my door in order to receive the hospitality of my home (Peperzak 39).



points to the unfathomable and therefore God-like quality of the other. For Levinas, the unnameable other comes from beyond the world.

Infiniment éloigné de la relation même où il entre, il s'y présente d'emblée en absolu. . . . L'être qui se présente en lui [le visage] vient d'une dimension de hauteur, dimension de la transcendance où il peut se présenter comme étranger, sans s'opposer à moi, comme obstacle ou ennemi (*Totalité et infini* 237).

The face of the other calls for the recognition of the other as "infinitely distant," from a strange, foreign land "of height" and "of transcendence" which renders the other unrepresentable and thereby prevents the self from reifying the other into an "obstacle" or "enemy" that must be annihilated. In fact, Levinas depicts the ethical relation as a "conversation" between two separate subjects in which not only facial but linguistic expression or language helps sustain the distinction between the speakers. "Le discours, du fait même qu'il maintient la distance entre moi et Autrui, la séparation radicale . . . empêche la reconstitution de la totalité" (*Totalité et infini* 29).

This totality, which Levinas repeatedly rejects, refers to the notion of a union between the other and the self based on the illusion of their complementarity. In creating a oneness or a "totalité," the self and other, Levinas alleges, would foster their sense of sameness and thus obliterate their differences.

Furthermore, although revealing God, the other is nonetheless vulnerable and destitute, which deters any violence towards this strange other. "Autrui qui me domine dans sa transcendance est aussi l'étranger, la veuve et l'orphelin envers qui je suis obligé" (*Totalité et infini* 237). In its juxtaposition with "widow and orphan," Levinas's *étranger* indeed connotes a state of defenselessness and therefore of need that beckons the self. For Levinas, then, the effect of the other's unfathomable "infini" on the self is "plus fort que le meurtre" (*Totalité et infini* 217), that is, than the urge to kill the other. The Other's alterity is a God-like, absolute quality or an "enigma," as Levinas often calls it, that comes from up above and which, when acknowledged, immediately inflicts a sense of obligation in the subject for the other and not an incorporation of the other into a state of sameness or "totality." Highlighting the religious influence in his concept of ethics, Levinas writes, "Nous proposons d'appeler religion le lien qui s'établit entre le Même et l'Autre, sans constituer une totalité" (*Totalité et infini* 30).

Less theological and more psychoanalytic, Kristeva primarily situates difference internally or "inside" and "down below" in the unconscious. However, Kristeva seems to agree with Levinas's depiction of alterity as unnameable

insofar as she also perceives otherness to be "outside" this world or meaningful language, in infinity, "unrepresentable" and "unthinkable" ("Postmodernism?" 141). Difference is, she asserts, "ce qui ne se représente pas, ce qui ne se dit pas ce qui reste en dehors des nominations et des idéologies" ("La Femme, ce n'est jamais ça" 519) [*italics added*]. Maintaining that alterity is both inside and outside, Kristeva's notion of otherness subverts language's opposition of the two terms and thus further exemplifies the impossibility of defining difference. Moreover, Kristeva claims that, given the decline of religious beliefs in the Western world, and especially in France, the other or foreigner does not exactly reveal the divine "Other," but rather substitutes God as the stimulator towards ethical relations; indeed, the other arouses an awareness and an appreciation of the strangeness within and without, thereby bringing the subject "back to life" from his or her narcissistic selfsame enclosure or tomb. "La figure de l'étranger vient en lieu et en place de la mort de Dieu et, chez ceux qui croient, l'étranger est là pour lui redonner vie" (*Étrangers* 59-60). Whether inside or outside or both, whether denotative of God or not, alterity, according to Levinas and Kristeva, is a mystery whose enigmatic aspect,

if acknowledged and respected, can lead to individual goodness and communal peace.

In defining the self as already other, Kristeva posits an active ethical self, one that must learn to appreciate and to explore the incomprehensible internal "étrangeté" and thus remain in a state of continual psychic flux.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in reconciling with the unconscious resurfacings, the ethical subject lives in ambivalence between the conscious and the unconscious, identity and alterity. Thus, in addition to Levinas's notion that ethical responsibility entails a sense of respect and care for the other, Kristeva also contends that responsibility includes and, in fact, starts with embracing and enhancing one's own internal psychic flux or ambivalence. "[L]a responsabilité" is, for Kristeva, "d'en jouer la fluidité contre les menaces de mort immanquables lorsque se constituent un dehors et un dedans, un moi et un autre, un groupe et un autre groupe" ("Le temps des femmes" 18). In her seminal essay, "Le temps des femmes," she goes on to say that the best means--other than analysis--to put this internal "fluidity into play" is through "des 'pratiques esthétiques,'" especially

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<sup>12</sup>However, as we shall see later on in this chapter, other writings by Kristeva suggest a pre- or early ethical passive openness to the other.

literature, which, she finds, "ne sont sans doute que la réplique moderne de l'éternelle question de la morale" (18).

Writing and Reading the Ambiguous Text: A Means to the Self  
In Difference

The writer of difference is one who no longer represses otherness within language, but rather underscores it and, in so doing, displays the closed system of rational discourse by breaking it open. Kristeva argues that the "only guarantee of ethics" in writing is a kind of writing that

assumes the necessity of adopting a stance of otherness, distance, even limitation, on the basis of which a structure, a logical discourse is sutured, hence demonstrable--not in a banal sense but by giving serious consideration to the new post-Freudian rationality that takes two stages into account, the conscious and the unconscious ones, and two types of corresponding types of performances (*Desire in Language* ix).

Indeed, poetic texts' double language uncovers the inherent ambivalent state of the writing subject who, as Dawne McCance's reading of Kristeva explains, "is never either monological reason or asymbolic rhythm, but an unending dialogic, ethical process-production between the two" (McCance 93). The ethical writer reflects a balance between the symbolic and semiotic aspects of language and thus avoids total conformity to the law as well as pure negativity which would only lead to anarchy. One example of

such ethical writing, lauded by Kristeva, is Roman Jakobson's lecture "La Poésie russe de ma génération" in which he interprets Futurists' poetry, such as the works of Vladimir Maiakovskii and of Velimir Khlebnikov, by exploring the "autre du contrat linguistique et/ou social" ("Éthique de la linguistique" 364) while, nevertheless, also considering the more symbolic aspects, such as structure and law.

Elsewhere, Kristeva refers to the writer's internal ambivalence as "une bisexualité" (Gauthier 99) to the extent that the writing subject "traverses" the phallic position of mastery and, in so doing, experiences "la différence des sexes non pas comme une opposition figée ('homme' - 'femme') mais comme un *procès de différenciation* (Gauthier 99 ). Writing, therefore, allows one to heighten the sense of internal difference, "une bisexualité qui est précisément la possibilité d'explorer toutes les ressources de la signification, aussi bien ce qui pose un sens que ce qui le multiplie, le pulvérise et le rénove" (Gauthier 99). Alternately exploding and bringing meaning or language back to life, writing resuscitates the divided (bisexual) self who Kristeva deems ethical insofar as, like the analysand in psychoanalysis, he or she remains open not just to internal otherness but to others' alterity as well.

Kristeva's notion of a "certain bisexuality" in the ethical writer brings to mind another French feminist contemporary's thoughts on the "bisexual" writer. Indeed, Cixous's depiction of "*l'autre bisexualité*" (155 *La Jeune née*) further elaborates on the psychic split in the writer who, because of his or her "non-exclusion de la différence ni d'un sexe," (155 *La Jeune née*) benefits from and opens up within this bisexuality which does not annihilate differences "*mais les anime, les poursuit, les ajoute*" (156). Bisexual writing, which Cixous equates to feminine writing, never appropriates the stranger into the selfsame because this kind of writing embraces alterity through its constant, fleeting identifications with various internal and external others.

[S]on écriture ne peut aussi que se poursuivre, . . . osant ces traversées vertigineuses d'autres, éphémères et passionnés séjours en lui, elles, eux, qu'elle habite le temps de les regarder au plus près de l'inconscient dès leur lever, de les aimer au plus près de la pulsion, et ensuite plus loin, toute imprégnée de ces brèves identificatoires embrassades, elle va, et passe à l'infini (*La Jeune née* 162).

Cixous sees bisexual writing as a creative process that plays with internal and external difference so as to wil[l] the togetherness of one-another (*La Jeune née* 159). Like Kristeva, Cixous considers writing that engages in the "je/jeu de la bisexualité" (*La Jeune née* 159) to be the

modus operandi par excellence that fosters ethical relations, rather than hate and death. She states,

Or écrire c'est travailler; être travaillé; (dans) l'entre, interroger, (se laisser interroger) le procès du même et de l'autre sans lequel nul n'est vivant; défaire le travail de la mort, en voulant l'ensemble de l'un-avec-l'autre, dynamisé à l'infini par un incessant échange de l'un entre l'autre ne se connaissant et se recommençant qu'à partir du plus lointain--de soi, de l'autre, de l'autre en moi. Parcours multiplicateur à milliers de transformations (*La Jeune née* 159).

Further, the writer of difference, Cixous proclaims, not only flies into/steals (vole) the rational language of mastery and of stable meaning in order to change or revolutionize it, but also flies into/steals the other, thereby momentarily experiencing the *jouissance* of becoming other, different, and thus always in flux.

Hétérogène, oui, à son bénéfice joyeux elle est érogène, elle est l'érogénéité de l'hétérogène; ce n'est pas à elle-même qu'elle tient, la nageuse aérienne, la voleuse. Dispersable, prodigue, étourdissante, désireuse et capable d'autre, de l'autre femme qu'elle sera, de l'autre femme qu'elle n'est pas, de lui, de toi (*La Jeune née* 164).

In the opening pages of *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, Kristeva's description of the process of how she will write about the foreigner's otherness in her book outlines, in effect, the act of writing difference as proposed by Cixous. Indeed, in the following explanation of her writing, Kristeva reiterates Cixous's belief that, insofar as writing entails brief identifications with others, "on ne fétichise pas le



personnel, la permanence de l'identité" whether it be that of the self or of the other (Cixous, *La Jeune née* 168).

Kristeva writes,

Ne pas chercher à fixer, à chosifier l'étrangeté de l'étranger. Juste la toucher, l'effleurer, sans lui donner de structure définitive. Simplement en esquisser le mouvement perpétuel à travers quelques-uns des visages disparates déployés sous nos yeux aujourd'hui, à travers quelques-unes de ses figures anciennes changeantes dispersées dans l'histoire. L'alléger aussi, cette étrangeté, en y revenant sans cesse--mais de plus en plus rapidement. S'évader de sa haine et de son fardeau, les fuir non par le nivellement et l'oubli, mais par la reprise *harmonieuse* des différences qu'elle suppose et propage (*Étrangers* 11).

Next, Kristeva depicts writing the other as an aesthetic activity that is akin to listening to Bach's *Toccatas* et *Fugues*, thereby echoing Cixous's notion of writing as a process of "flying into/thieving" the other.

*Toccatas et fugues*: les pièces de Bach évoquent à mes oreilles le sens que je voudrais moderne de l'étrangeté reconnue et poignante, parce que soulevée, soulagée, disséminée, inscrite dans un jeu neuf en formation, sans but, sans borne, sans fin. Étrangeté à peine effleurée et qui, déjà, s'éloigne (*Étrangers* 11).

By continually touching and then fleeing (*Toccatas* et *fugues*) the other or stealing and flying into/from the other, the ethical writer explores, plays with, and welcomes alterity.

In both their theoretical essays and novels, Kristeva and Cixous further concur that the act of reading difference is just as ethical as writing one's experience of internal

and external otherness. In "L'Approche de Clarice Lispector," Cixous claims that Lispector teaches the reader how to read differently, to search for and love otherness through her exemplary writing of difference.

Et nous entrons, par son écriture-fenêtre, dans la terrible beauté d'apprendre à lire: se vivre, en allant, à travers le corps, de l'autre côté du moi. Seule une femme peut donner l'exemple d'un tel risque non simulé: aimer le vrai du vivant, ce qui semble ingrat aux yeux narcisses, le sans-prestige, le sans-actualité, aimer l'origine, s'intéresser personnellement à l'impersonnel, à l'animal, à la chose. À l'autre (115).

Calling for a type of reading that underscores internal difference, Cixous, in effect, wants to return to the act of reading she practiced as a child. Her childhood reading entailed an enhanced bisexuality, a play with difference whereby she identified with both sexes equally and always embraced the other's uniqueness.

Et j'ai su aimer. J'ai aimé puissamment des femmes et des hommes: je connaissais le prix d'un être unique, sa beauté, sa douceur. Je ne me posais aucune question mesquine, j'ignorais les limites, je jouissais sans angoisse de ma bisexualité: que les deux genres en moi s'harmonisent me paraissait tout naturel. Je ne pensais même pas qu'il pût en être autrement (*La Jeune née* 134-35).

Although usually pleasurable, reading and writing the other, however, paradoxically elicit instances of unpleasure as well. The ethical inclusion of the other in the revolutionary writing and reading of difference is indeed difficult and even agonizing ("angoissant" (*La Jeune née*

168)), according to Cixous, and "cela ne se fait pas sans risque, sans douleur, sans perte, de moments de soi, de conscience, de personnes que l'on a été, que l'on dépasse, que l'on quitte (*La Jeune née* 159). Outlining both the enjoyable and the disquieting aspects of writing/reading postmodern texts, Cixous explains,

L'écriture, c'est en moi le passage, entrée, sortie, séjour, de l'autre que je suis et ne suis pas, que je ne sais pas être, mais que je sens passer, qui me fait vivre,--qui me déchire, m'inquiète, m'altère, qui?--une, un, des?, plusieurs, de l'inconnu qui me donne justement l'envie de connaître à partir de laquelle s'élance toute vie. Ce peuplement ne laisse ni repos ni sécurité, trouble toujours le rapport au 'réel', produit des effets d'incertitude qui font obstacle à la socialisation du sujet. C'est angoissant, ça use (*La Jeune née* 158).

Indeed, the reader of difference experiences, as Cixous writes elsewhere, a "terrible beauté," ("*L'Approche de Clarice Lispector*" 115) a simultaneously disconcerting and gratifying *jouissance* insofar as the reader disregards "patriarchal" language's confining, yet comforting, focus on a single, stable meaning and on linear, rational thinking. Cixous's autobiographical fiction *Dedans* presents the reading of difference as, in fact, a difficult and sometimes troubling form of revolt against patriarchal language. Towards the beginning of the text, the young female narrator, for instance, refuses to stop reading in order to open the house's portal for her father, thus pointing to

reading otherness as an act of resistance to the father's (patriarchy's or Father's) language.

C'est l'heure où Il approche. Le portail est au fond de l'allée, cadénassé, hérissé de piques, rouillé mais protecteur. . . je lis. Dans les mots je vais loin, plus loin qu'aucun humain n'est jamais allé. Comment pourrais-je ouvrir le portail d'où je suis? Comment saisir la clé de mes mains occupées? D'ailleurs je n'entends pas, je suis trop loin. Il se peut que mon père soit devant le portail, il se peut que sa fille ait entendu sa voix, mais moi je n'entends rien, je suis trop loin. Un brusque retour me tuerait. . . . Mon plaisir est plus grand que ma crainte, ma faim est plus puissante que mon père. Je n'ouvre pas (19).

As exemplified in this scene, reading difference, for Cixous, is a simultaneously enrapturing yet trying deferral of meaning that allows the reader "to go far" and experience her otherness "inside" as, although primarily gratifying, frightening as well. Reading and writing the other serve therefore as a temporary, albeit distressing, refuge from "patriarchal" logical language, i.e., the f/Father's voice.

Perhaps more than Cixous, Kristeva underscores the writer's and reader's mixed reaction to avant-garde and postmodern novels' intermittent "pulverization" of rational, linear language. While highlighting the positive freeing aspect of the (post)modern writer's and reader's *jouissance*, Kristeva tends to concentrate more on their frustration. Always mindful of the correspondence between self and text, living and writing/reading, Kristeva points to the discontinuity and ongoing deferral of identity and meaning

inherent in both living and aesthetic activity, and explains how this fragmentation and lack of closure affect us in her novel *Les Samourais*.

L'avantage d'une vie (ou d'une histoire) disposée ainsi en étoile, où les choses bougent sans forcément se recouper, progressent mais ne se retrouvent pas, et où chaque jour (comme chaque chapitre) est un autre monde qui feint d'oublier le précédent, est de correspondre à une tendance semble-t-il essentielle au monde: à son état d'expansion congénital, à sa dilation. . . . Le même mouvement commande d'ailleurs les pulsations d'un récit qui redémarre à chaque fois en laissant le lecteur moitié déçu, moitié avide: car peut-être ne retrouvera-t-il jamais les siens, mais pourvu qu'on avance... (284-85)<sup>13</sup>

While nevertheless acknowledging the beneficial effects of always being in "progress" or "en-procès," that is to say, in a constant ethical state of change, difference, and deferral, Kristeva describes the (post)modern reader's experience as primarily disconcerting--"half disappointed and half eager."

In "The Uncanny," Freud similarly holds that the process of reading certain kinds of literature elicits uncomfortable, contradictory feelings in the reader which he identifies as the *inquiétante étrangeté* in which the familiar (*heimlich*) is seen as strange (*unheimlich*). But

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<sup>13</sup>In an interview with Elisabeth Bélorgey, Kristeva admits that this excerpt provides an image for the composition of *Les Samourais*, thereby suggesting that her book purposely sets out to unsettle the reader. See Bélorgey's "A Propos des *Samourais*" in *L'Infini* 30 (Summer 1990): 55-56.

the narrative texts that, Freud claims, evoke uncanniness in the reader are the eerie "fantastic tales" ("The Uncanny" 132) which provoke both fear and attraction, as, for instance, Hoffmann's short story "The Sand-man." Given her poststructuralist concern with language, in *Étrangers*, Kristeva further analyzes the reader's experience of ambivalence engendered by the uncanny, claiming it to be the reader's reaction to his or her psychic or imaginary reification of signs. As Kristeva elaborates, the reader's "incertitude intellectuelle" et "logique déconcertée" (*Étrangers* 275), which instigate his or her *inquiétante étrangeté*, ensue from the symbol's or signifier's tendency to be reified by psychic contents of the imagination which take the place of the symbol's material reality (*Étrangers* 276).<sup>14</sup> Reiterating Freud, but from a more linguistic psychoanalytic perspective, Kristeva observes that strange and unsettling stories stimulate

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<sup>14</sup>As Kristeva explains it, quoting Freud, Le symbole cesse d'être symbole et 'revêt toute l'efficacité et toute la signification du symbolisé'. (Freud, *L'Inquiétante Étrangeté*, 251) En d'autres termes, le signe n'est pas vécu comme arbitraire, mais prend une importance réelle. En conséquence, la réalité matérielle que le signe devait couramment indiquer s'effrite au profit de l'imagination, qui n'est que 'l'accentuation excessive de la réalité psychique par rapport à la réalité matérielle' (Ibid) (*Étrangers* 275).

la 'toute-puissance de la pensée' qui, pour se constituer, invalide aussi bien l'arbitraire des signes que l'autonomie de la réalité, et les met sous la domination de fantasmes exprimant des désirs ou des craintes infantiles (*Étrangers* 275).

However, in addition to what Kristeva calls "disturbing tales," revolutionary narrative texts also provoke the reader's *inquiétante étrangeté*. Revolutionary novels's ambiguity, repetition, and constant deferral of meaning weaken and even subvert the closed, one-to-one, arbitrary correspondence between signifier and signified and thus set the stage for the reader's imagination to reify signs. In evoking strange or uncanny feelings which, as we already discussed, allude to the resurfacing of the repressed unconscious, ambiguous literature becomes a new type of "disturbing tale" that encourages the reader's openness to the different, to the unthinkable. Indeed, as Kristeva states,

*l'inquiétante étrangeté est une destruction du moi qui peut soit perdurer comme symptôme psychotique, soit s'inscrire comme ouverture à l'incongru. Retour d'un refoulé familier, certes, l'Unheimliche n'en nécessite pas moins l'impulsion d'une rencontre nouvelle avec un extérieur inattendu (Étrangers 278).*

This "extérieur inattendu" then is not exclusively a human other, but may also be a textual other--a novel, for instance. Consequently, novels that, at first, perhaps "shock" and confuse the reader, due to their ambiguous language, imagery, characters, and plot, enhance the

reader's usually repressed ambivalent, divided self which then renders him or her more likely to accept others' equally surprising and ineffable alterity. Instead of the foreigner's startling, strange face, it is the text's confounding strangeness that indirectly incites ethical relations. In short, the reading of difference, that is, reading novels that exemplify and thematize undecidability, promotes our living in and with the strange other.

Moreover, reading or interpreting a text is itself an ethical relation between self and other. According to Kristeva, to practice ethical responsibility vis-à-vis the text as other, the reader or interpreter must actively apprehend textual ambiguity and not search for closure or a moral message which, on the contrary, suggests that the reader, in his or her concern to completely understand and master the text/other, represses the text's alterity, or that which escapes meaning or understanding. The direct statement of as well as the reading of a truth or moral message "est déjà une suppression de la fonction éthique telle que nous l'entendons" (*Révolution* 203). To write and to read in an ethical manner require the pluralization and pulverization of truths and moral messages (*Révolution* 203), thereby becoming processes or ongoing "progressions" that multiply interpretations.



In *The Ethics of Reading*, J. Hillis Miller likewise finds that reading and writing narrative is like entering a relationship with the other insofar as it awakens the ethical self. Narrative is "the search for a perhaps impossible proximity to the law," (25) or to "truth," which renders narrative fragmented, at times, illogical, and devoid of a single, obvious meaning. This kind of narrative, argues Miller, conveys ethics as the practice of lingering in a state of ambivalence, deferral, and indeterminacy, never claiming to grasp the impossible "truth."

[I]nsofar as narrative takes place within the space of perpetual deferral of direct confrontation with the law, it can be said that narrative is the narration of the impossibility of narrative in the sense of a coherent, logical, perspicuous story with beginning, middle, end, and paraphrasable meaning. The function of narrative, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear with and understand, is to keep this out in the open" (Miller 25).

Thus far, I have outlined the various reasons why Kristeva and other contemporary theorists consider revolutionary literature, whose ambiguous language, imagery, plot and character make for seemingly pointless texts that lack any moral message, to be, on the contrary, ethical. For Kristeva, in particular, reading and writing such textual ambiguity are ethical "practices" that help achieve a self who is open to the other insofar as reading and

writing difference disrupt unitary meaning in texts and the analogous narcissistic notion of a stable, unified subject. Such aesthetic activity, it seems, incites the subject to embrace all kinds of differences: textual, intrasubjective as well as intersubjective. Practicing textual ambiguity, the three novels to be analyzed in this dissertation reflect and effect the ambivalent writer and reader who embrace otherness. These narrative works additionally thematize ambivalence in self-formation as each presents a protagonist immersed in play or aesthetic activity, that is, in instances of enhanced undecidability. Further, these novels focus on the *sujet-en-procès* as the protagonists struggle with narcissism and melancholia, two psychological states that, according to psychoanalysis, paradoxically either hinder or promote the subject's internal ambivalence or *procès*. Having already discussed the importance of aesthetic activity, namely writing and reading, in the development of a self open to alterity, which, in Kristevan terms, is the ethical self, I now move onto an examination of narcissism and melancholia and their role in the formation of the subject and text in difference.

Limited Narcissism and The Ethical Self

In *Le Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Laplanche and Pontalis define narcissism as "la constitution du moi [ego] comme unité psychique" which parallels "la constitution du schéma corporel" (262). They argue that the self achieves a sense of unity by "acquiring" or internalizing the image of an other who appears whole and stable. Narcissism is then an essential moment in the process of self-formation whereby the bodily image of self "captivates" the subject. Thus, as Laplanche and Pontalis conclude,

[d]ans une telle perspective, où le moi se définit par une identification à l'image d'autrui, le narcissisme--même 'primaire'<sup>15</sup>--n'est pas un état d'où serait absente toute relation intersubjective mais l'intériorisation d'une relation (262).

According to both Freud and Lacan, these processes of self-absorption persist into adulthood. In Freud's depiction of narcissism, he contends, for example, that vestiges of childhood narcissism remain in adults because, he proclaims, "the narcissistic organization is never altogether given up again" (*Totem and Taboo* 116). In fact, "the narcissistic

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<sup>15</sup>Laplanche and Pontalis write, Chez Freud, le narcissisme primaire désigne d'une façon générale le premier narcissisme, celui de l'enfant qui se prend lui-même comme objet d'amour avant de choisir des objets extérieurs. Un tel état correspondrait à la croyance de l'enfant à la toute puissance de ses pensées (264).

libidinal cathexis of the ego is the original state of things, and is merely covered by the later intrusions of libido, but in essentials persists behind them" (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 84). Jacques Lacan later reiterates and elaborates on Freud's claim when he explains that the narcissistic internalization of the other or object into the self becomes the standard relation to the other/object because it provides an assuring illusion of a peaceful, stable, whole self.<sup>16</sup>

For Cixous, Levinas, and Kristeva, narcissism, although vital to self-formation, can easily impede ethical relations. Cixous, for instance, argues that the dynamics of domination in past and contemporary social relations stems from narcissism or "l'Empire du Propre" which, she explains, Hegel's dialectic--presented in the *Phenomenology of the Mind*--correctly outlines, "malheureusement," as "la sortie du sujet dans l'autre pour revenir à lui-même (*La Jeune née* 144). Cixous denounces the conventional narcissistic relationship between the sexes wherein, she claims, man (or self) eradicates the woman's (or the other's) alterity through a process of appropriation in order to return to the selfsame. This circuitous movement

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<sup>16</sup>See my discussion of Lacan's "méconnaissance" of the self as a process of introjection and projection vis-à-vis the other or object in Chapter 2.

through the other back to the self renders the other, which Cixous usually equates with woman, as mere support for the narcissistic self, which she generally associates with man.

[D]ans le schéma de la reconnaissance (hégélienne) il n'y a pas de place pour l'autre, pour un autre égal, pour une femme entière et vivante. Il faut qu'elle le reconnaisse et en le reconnaissant, dans le temps de l'accomplissement, qu'elle disparaisse, en lui laissant le bénéfice d'un gain--ou d'une victoire, imaginaire. La femme bonne ce sera donc celle qui 'résiste' assez longtemps pour qu'il puisse éprouver sur elle sa force et son désir (je veux dire qui 'existe'), et pas trop, afin de lui donner à jouir, sans trop d'obstacles, du retour à lui-même qu'il opère, grandi--rassuré à ses propres yeux (*La Jeune née* 145-46).

Otherwise stated, Cixous charges that narcissism impedes "un type d'échange où chacun conserverait l'autre en vie et en différence (*La Jeune née* 145)). Despite Cixous's persistent attack against narcissism as the model for social relations, she nevertheless proffers a theory of *brief identifications* with others--already considered above--thereby promoting a controlled or limited narcissism which, paradoxically, encourages the self to embrace difference.

Like Cixous, Levinas's definition of narcissism is offered as an alternative to Hegel's dialectic narcissism, which, Levinas points out disapprovingly, encourages the "[i]dentité de l'identique et du non-identique" and "[l]e travail de la pensée à raison de toute altérité des choses et des hommes" ("*Éthique comme philosophie première*" 43). Levinas delineates instead a narcissism that enhances an

awareness of the body whereby the subject appropriates objects--but not human others--thus forming the "egoist" self. The object or "other" that the subject narcissistically incorporates is

[l]e pain que je mange, . . . le pays que j'habite, . . . le paysage que je contemple, . . . parfois, moi-même à moi-même, ce 'je', cet 'autre'. De ces réalités je peux 'me repaître' et, dans une très large mesure, me satisfaire, comme si elles m'avaient manqué. Par là même, leur altérité se résorbe dans mon identité de pensant et de possédant (*Totalité et infini* 21).

This "egoism" is essential to maintaining ethical relations with another person whose ungraspable alterity, on the other hand, cannot be internalized into the selfsame or egoist self. Indeed, Levinas posits the need for a narcissistic incorporation of "les objets usuels, les nourritures, le monde même que nous habitons," (*Totalité et infini* 28) in order to enter the relationship with the human other (which Levinas refers to as the "metaphysical relationship"), with a sense of corporeal existence; with this awareness of a bodily self, the subject avoids any unification with the other that would result in a "totality" or sameness.

L'identification du Même n'est pas le vide d'une tautologie, ni une opposition dialectique à l'Autre, mais le concret de l'égoïsme. Cela importe à la possibilité de la métaphysique. Si le Même s'identifiait par simple opposition à l'Autre, il ferait déjà partie d'une totalité englobant le Même et l'Autre. La prétention du désir métaphysique dont nous étions partis--relation avec l'absolument autre--se trouverait démentie (*Totalité et infini* 27).

Levinas's narcissism is, ironically, a means to respecting the human other's difference. Further, as Peperzak concludes after considering Levinas's inclusion of narcissism in his philosophy of human experience, "without any sameness, unity, and totality, only the dispersion of an extreme atomism would remain which would be the end of all philosophy and thought in general" (Peperzak 130-31). Thus, it appears that for Levinas some degree of narcissism is necessary for the formation of a thinking self.

Yet, Levinas is quick to point out that the subject's sense of identity or of narcissistic unity does not remain undisturbed; it is indeed split open by the unnameable other's presence that resists appropriation into the selfsame. "La présence d'Autrui équivaut à cette mise en question de ma joyeuse possession du monde" (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 73). More specifically, the other's speech or expression arouses the self's sense of care for the other, thereby forcing the self to break out of his or her comfortable narcissistic enclosure.

Cette identité sans défaut libérée de toute participation, indépendante dans le moi, peut cependant perdre sa tranquillité si l'autre, au lieu de la heurter en surgissant sur le même plan qu'elle, lui parle, c'est-à-dire se montre dans l'expression, dans le visage et vient de haut. La liberté s'inhibe alors non point comme arbitraire, coupable et timide; mais dans sa culpabilité elle s'élève à la responsabilité (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 223).

Consequently, given the importance of narcissism in Levinas's theory of subjectivity, we should, perhaps, not refer to his ideas as solely "the philosophy of the other" but rather as the more ambivalent "philosophy of the same and the other." Both narcissism and openness towards difference comprise human experience, according to Levinas; indeed, as Peperzak reading Levinas puts it, the subject exists on a

two-dimension reality: as separated individuals, we are independent and egocentric, centers and masters of an economy that is also an egonomy; as transcending toward the Other, we live in a different dimension, the structure of which is made of transcendence, alterity, and the impossibility of totalization and identification (Peperzak 135).

Kristeva denounces the Cartesian subject's appropriation of the other which, she declares, forms "une totalité indifférenciée" (*Révolution* 91), thus reiterating Levinas's condemnation of a narcissistic "totalité" with the other. Kristeva asserts that

il [le sujet Cartésien] est censé être tout le monde puisque la systématité symbolique a évacué l'hétérogénéité en évacuant le négatif, et se déploie en se voulant transparente, éternellement communicable, omnivalente. Le destinataire est donc une totalité indifférenciée, sans procès, un 'eux', devenu, à l'instar de 'nous', un terme, un élément du système auquel il s'identifie car il n'existe pas comme sujet sans le système (*Révolution* 91).

While critical of the type of narcissism inherent in the Cartesian theory of subjectivity, a narcissism that



represses otherness, Kristeva recognizes the important role of identity-- albeit an identity that is intermittently contested by eruptions of non-identity or of the semiotic-- in the process of subject formation. For Kristeva, identity is a symbolic aspect of subjectivity which, in fact, results from a sense of love for the other. The self attains identity through the narcissistic incorporation not of the other, but of the other's language, that is, in Lacanian terminology, of the Symbolic.<sup>17</sup> "De pouvoir recevoir les mots de l'autre, de les assimiler, répéter, reproduire, je deviens comme lui: Un. Un sujet de l'énonciation. Par identification-osmose psychique. Par amour" (Kristeva, *Histoires d'amour* 37-38). For Kristeva, then, loving the other incites mimicry which entails the internalization of the other's language and thus generates the subject's sense of symbolic identity. Language or meaning and, concomitantly, the narcissistic sense of a unified identity, in turn, deter total self-fragmentation, i.e., psychosis, by helping to maintain the empty dividing space or "vide" separating the self from psychic chaos.

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<sup>17</sup>The Symbolic, along with the Imaginary and the Real, are the three essential orders which, Lacan holds, constitute the subject. Whereas the Symbolic is the pre-established social order or law which includes language, the Imaginary deals with the self's (narcissistic) relation to the image of the counterpart and the Real connotes the unrepresentable pre-Oedipal realm of the self.

Une protection du vide (de l'arbitraire', de la 'béance') grâce au déploiement d'une parade en effet narcissique, pour que ce vide se maintienne, faute de quoi s'installerait le chaos, l'effacement de frontières. Le narcissisme protège le vide, le fait exister et ainsi, comme envers de ce vide, il assure une séparation élémentaire. Sans cette solidarité entre le vide et le narcissisme, le chaos emporterait toute possibilité de distinction, de trace et de symbolisation, entraînant la confusion des limites du corps, des mots, du réel et du symbolique. (Kristeva, *Histoires d'amour* 35).

Keeping at bay "la confusion des limites," narcissism, in the form of meaningful language, sustains difference--"la possibilité de distinction"--between self and other. However, while essential to maintaining this distinction, if over-emphasized, narcissistic identity may instigate either a violent rejection of the other or the assimilation of otherness into sameness. To prevent this, Kristeva, like Levinas, pinpoints reverence for the other as the antidote to a potentially harmful over-valorization of identity. As I hope to elucidate in the next section of this chapter, the subject's "negative narcissism" or melancholia, as defined by Kristeva, is the psychological state in which the self respects the internal other and which, as a result, contributes to the formation of an ethical self.

Thus, for Cixous, Levinas, and Kristeva, philosophy's conventional notion of narcissism whereby the subject internalizes the other's difference into the selfsame does not allow for the consideration of alterity needed for

ethical relations to take place. In contrast to the traditional perception of narcissism, all three theorists posit different versions of a more controlled narcissism which are essential to the production of a subject simultaneously in and respectful of difference. Kristeva's "negative narcissism," in particular, provides an insightful interpretation of the formation of both the contemporary ethical self and text.

#### Melancholia, Aesthetic Play and the Ethical Self/Text

As we just examined, in its traditional definition, narcissism is a passage through the other to attain "increased being" or "that ever mythical 'greater being'" (Alcorn 15). However, more contemporary concepts of a limited narcissism, such as those proposed by Levinas and Kristeva, posit a more ethical subject who acknowledges the impossibility to define and therefore to master the other. Given his or her awareness of the inability to ever completely grasp otherness, the self, in its more recent definition, may undergo not a constant gratifying narcissistic sense of "greater being" but rather moments of pain or, what I refer to as, instances of "a nascent ethical melancholia."

In Freud's definition, melancholia is a heightened state of internal ambivalence, an oscillation between love

and hate for the other within the self that causes suffering. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud explains that the melancholic's unpleasant internal division results from the incorporation of the lost loved one or object and, most importantly, from the internalization of the ambivalent feelings towards that other as well. In other words, part of the self identifies with the lost other, i.e., loves the other, and another part of the self, which Freud calls the "critical agency," disparages the other, i.e., hates the other; but since this other has been internalized, the criticism is now directed towards the self. Indeed, after examining melancholic patients whose "many and various self-accusations . . . are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself," Freud concludes that "they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love. . . . [W]e perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it onto the patient's own ego" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 248). Unable to decathect libidinal energy towards the lost object as is performed in mourning, the melancholic rather redirects this libidinal attachment for the other to the self, thus displaying "a regression from object-cathexis to the still narcissistic oral phase of the libido" (Mourning 250) [emphasis added]. Melancholic

narcissism then instigates perpetual, disturbing feelings of ambivalence which, Freud asserts, are extremely difficult to control or change into a peaceful sense of inner sameness and self-love. Consequently, this depressed state of internal oscillation represents a type of narcissism that can never bring about a pleasant sense of stability, wholeness, and therefore of enhanced being. Melancholia is a kind of narcissism that does not reinforce the self's identity or experience of oneness but, on the contrary, fragments the self to the point of risking psychosis or death; hence Kristeva's definition of melancholia as a "negative narcissism."<sup>18</sup>

Melancholia, Kristeva claims in *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancholie*, entails the subject's identification not with the other, as Freud posits, but rather with the void

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<sup>18</sup>As she indicates in a footnote in *Soleil noir*, Kristeva derives the notion of "narcissisme négatif" from another psychoanalytic theorist André Green who defines negative narcissism as follows:

Au-delà du morcellement qui fragmente le moi et le ramène à l'auto-érotisme, le narcissisme primaire absolu veut le repos mimétique de la mort. Il est la quête du non-désir de l'autre, de l'inexistence, du non-être, autre forme d'accès à l'immortalité (Green 278).

Further depicting the subject's reaction to its fragmentation as "melancholia," Kristeva then simply equates "melancholia" to "negative narcissism."

left by the indefinable other--the lost (m)other<sup>19</sup> or "la Chose ineffable"--which instigates a painful experience of nothingness. "Le dépressif narcissique est en deuil non pas d'un Objet mais de la Chose. Appelons ainsi le réel rebelle à la signification, le pôle d'attrait et de répulsion" (*Soleil noir* 22). No word can replace this Thing as it is, she insists, "innommable." As a result, rather than name the internalized (m)other and, in so doing, master and assimilate the (m)other (the semiotic) into the selfsame (the symbolic), as is done in the process of mourning, Kristeva concludes that melancholia represents the subject's suffering and living with the ineffable Thing within. Whereas in mourning, the self accepts losing the (m)other in order to recuperate her in language (*Soleil noir* 55), thereby negating the loss, in melancholia, the subject "dénie la dénégaration: il l'annule, la suspend et se replie, nostalgique, sur l'objet réel (la Chose) de sa perte qu'il n'arrive précisément pas à perdre, auquel il reste rivé" (*Soleil noir* 55). Kristeva's definition of melancholia as the subject's refusal to substitute his or her sense of

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<sup>19</sup>I employ the English phonetic slippage between mother and other in order to further highlight Kristeva's analogy between the archaic maternal Thing and the other. While only English allows for the "(m)other" slippage, Kristeva's discussion of the "oceanic" sense of otherness in *Soleil noir* alludes to an equivalent phonetic play in French between *mer* and *mère*.

otherness with language may be read, as Ewa Ziarek perceptively points out, as "an ethics of otherness" ("Kristeva and Levinas" 74). Emphasizing the similarities between Kristeva's notion of melancholia and Levinas's ethics of alterity, Ziarek brings to light the Levinasian ethical dimension in Kristeva's discussion of negative narcissism presented in *Soleil noir*. Ziarek's interpretation is an insightful one that is worth quoting at length.

I suggest that her [Kristeva's] description of melancholia as a refusal to overcome the loss of the other through symbolic elaboration is similar to the face-to-face encounter in the Levinasian ethics. In both cases, the breakdown of mediation points to the exteriority of the other with respect to the sociolinguistic totality, and, in both cases the other signifies through a 'disturbance' or excess. To redefine the melancholic disorder as an ethics of otherness would require, however, a displacement from the concern with the subject--its individuation, its anguish, its wounds, its crises--to alterity ontologically and ethically prior to the subject. In a certain way, melancholia already registers this reversal; the crisis reveals that the subject and its means of representation are always already overwhelmed by the other: 'In the tension of their affects, muscles, mucous membranes, and skin, they experience both their belonging to and distance from an archaic other that still eludes representation and naming, but of whose corporeal emissions, along with their automatism, they still bear the imprint' (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 14).<sup>20</sup> . . . [T]he mark of alterity ('bearing

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<sup>20</sup>By juxtaposing her claim that the melancholic subject is "overwhelmed by the other" to Kristeva's quote which imparts that melancholics still maintain difference between self and other--"they experience both belonging to and distance from the archaic other" (*Black Sun* 14) [emphasis

the imprint of the other') points to the subject's indebtedness to the other, to a forgotten maternal gift, which enables our ethical orientation in the world. (Ziarek, "Kristeva and Levinas" 74).

Although, for Kristeva, ethical respect for alterity usually implies a conscious decision, her depiction of the melancholic's inability to replace alterity with words intimates a nascent, *passive* reverence for the other by, as Ziarek sees it from a Levinasian perspective, not attempting to absorb alterity "in the immanence of linguistic totality" ("Kristeva and Levinas" 72). Melancholia is then a passive state which entails an unconscious abstention from naming the other that thus predisposes the depressed self to remain open to alterity. However, to the extent that melancholic passivity vis-à-vis otherness thwarts the subject's empowering neutralization of difference, that is, his or her achievement of a narcissistic "increased being," the reticent melancholic subject suffers to the point of, at times, even risking psychic death. No longer transformed

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added], Ziarek's use of "overwhelmed" in her statement does not suggest that the melancholic self is completely engulfed in otherness. Rather the melancholic's sense of being "overwhelmed" by the other intimates an experience of alterity whose undeniable, ongoing presence can no longer be successfully repressed through language. Thus, in this quote Ziarek simply seems to underscore the melancholic's acute sense of internal otherness. Nevertheless, as I will next examine, the melancholic may indeed ultimately become overpowered by otherness which then dissolves his or her psychic difference between sameness and alterity.



into the comfortable selfsame, the melancholic's unrepresentable internal otherness remains other which makes for a painful divided state. Yet, the melancholic may break his or her painful silence through aesthetic activity without having to repress alterity. In the remainder of this section on melancholia, I will discuss the two possible outcomes of the depressed subject as posited by Kristeva: (1) a gradual, increased distressful rejection of language or the symbolic which leads to psychosis, or (2) the pleasurable creative use of language or the symbolic that underscores and celebrates difference between self and other.

Incapable of voicing his or her alterity which then undermines his or her empowering mastery of difference, the negative narcissist starts to lose faith in language as he or she "s'enferme, inconsolable et aphasique, en tête à tête avec la Chose innommée (*Soleil noir* 23). While in reclusion with the unsayable Thing, the melancholic may eventually (but not necessarily) undergo "une réunion avec la non-intégration archaïque aussi léthale que jubilatoire, 'océanique.'" (*Soleil noir* 30); otherwise stated, the negative narcissist runs the chance of returning to the preoedipal state of complete semiotic otherness "entravant la cohésion du moi" (*Soleil noir* 28) and, as a result, risks

annihilating his or her internal difference between symbolic sameness and semiotic otherness. Further, while engulfed in this "oceanic void" of psychosis, the negative narcissist may ultimately commit suicide.

Il s'agit du sentiment et du fantasme de douleur, mais anesthésiée, de jouissance, mais suspendue, d'une attente et d'un silence aussi vides que comblés. . . . Pudique, mutique, sans lien de parole ou de désir aux autres, elle se consume de se porter des coups moraux et physiques qui, toutefois, ne lui procurent pas de plaisirs suffisants. Jusqu'au coup fatal--(*Soleil noir* 40).

The depressed subject, in fact, lacks "l'angoisse de désintégration" (*Soleil noir* 30) which would deter suicide. He or she remains indifferent towards (psychic) death because, by refusing to substitute maternal alterity or the semiotic with language or the symbolic, the melancholic "annihile le sens du symbolique" (*Soleil noir* 30) which includes destroying the meaning of the act of suicide.

As we already mentioned, language or the Symbolic, according to Kristeva, maintains the space that separates the self from complete semiotic chaos. It follows then that by rejecting language, the subject has no means of defense against total psychic disintegration. In order to survive, the subject needs both the symbolic, i.e., meaning and the sense of identity, and the semiotic, or feelings of internal alterity, as well as the continual oscillation between the two. Thus, Kristeva posits melancholia as the subject's

painful lack of integration between the semiotic and the symbolic which could easily cause the subject's (psychic) death, that is, his or her complete symbolic collapse into the semiotic where there is no difference, only otherness.

For Kristeva, art and especially avant-garde and postmodern literature display the melancholic's internal struggle bordering on psychosis.

[L]a création esthétique et notamment littéraire . . . dans son essence imaginaire, fictionnelle, proposent un dispositif dont l'économie prosodique, la dramaturgie des personnages et le symbolisme implicite sont une représentation sémiologique très fidèle de la lutte du sujet avec l'effondrement symbolique" (*Soleil noir* 35).

Yet, in addition to providing an accurate account of negative narcissism, literature, as well as psychoanalysis, may, in effect, prevent the melancholic's return to preoedipal nonintegration; indeed, these narrative processes (i.e., literature and psychoanalysis) incite the necessary and ethical--as Kristeva previously declared in *La Révolution*--movement or integration between the conscious and the unconscious, the symbolic and the semiotic. Both literature and psychoanalysis represent, Kristeva asserts,

[l]'expérience de la *mélancolie nommable* [qui] ouvre l'espace d'une subjectivité nécessairement hétérogène, écartelée entre les deux pôles conécessaires et coprésents de l'opacité et de l'idéal. L'opacité des choses comme celle du corps déshabité de signification--corps déprimé prompt au suicide--se translate dans le sens de l'oeuvre qui s'affirme à la fois absolu et corrompu, intenable, impossible, à refaire. Une subtile alchimie des signes s'impose alors--musicalisation des

signifiants, polyphonie des lexèmes, désarticulation des unités lexicales, syntaxiques, narratives...--qui est *irremédiablement* vécue comme une métamorphose psychique de l'être parlant entre les deux bords du non-sens et du sens, de Satan et de Dieu, de la Chute et de la Résurrection (*Soleil noir* 112).

Whereas psychoanalysis aims at "une prise de conscience" des causes inter- et intra-psychiques de la douleur morale [i.e., melancholia]" (*Soleil noir* 35) through a strengthening of the subject's cognitive possibilities, aesthetic activity offers both the artist and his or her audience a temporary "solution sublimatoire de nos crises" (*Soleil noir* 35).

[L]'oeuvre d'art qui assure une renaissance de son auteur et de son destinataire est celle qui réussit à intégrer dans la langue artificielle qu'elle propose (nouveau style, nouvelle composition, imagination surprenante) les émois innommés d'un moi omnipotent que l'usage social et linguistique courant laisse toujours quelque peu endeillé ou orphelin. Aussi une telle fiction est-elle sinon un antidépresseur, du moins une survie, une résurrection... (*Soleil noir* 62)

In order to generate the rebirth of or, in other words, to incite a pleasurable sense of ambivalence in their writers and readers, the texts that "name melancholia," which, in Kristeva's study, include Nerval's avant-garde poetry as well as Duras's postmodern fiction, practice, thematize, and evoke a play with language, meaning, imagery, and plot. I contend that this type of textual play or "mélancolie nommable" is not the attempt to name the unnameable other, which would bring about a satisfying,

narcissistic sense of mastery, of having appropriated difference into the selfsame; rather, it is the naming of the unnameability, that is, of the ineffable quality of the unsayable which elicits ethical joy. Indeed, avant-garde and postmodern literature of "nameable melancholia" is ethical insofar as it employs language not to absorb alterity into a "transcendental linguistic totality," but to recognize the impossibility of defining the other in language. This revolutionary literature of "nameable melancholia" does not use language or signifiers as a direct mediation between self and other, that is, as a means to capture difference, but rather as a way to play or, as Cixous says, "to fly/steal" in and around the other, experiencing brief flashes of otherness that exhilarate both reader and writer alike. Consequently, this kind of text presents and evokes the freedom and *jouissance* that accompany such a use of language and, moreover, that sublate both the artist's and the audience's melancholic suffering which results from the impossibility to ever name the elusive other. The three novels to be analyzed in the subsequent chapters depict protagonists who endure ethical melancholia as the characters acknowledge their inability to ever define or comprehend either internal or external alterity, thereby forgoing the narcissistic, gratifying

inclination to neutralize difference through language or the symbolic; as a result, they remain painfully silent and passive vis-à-vis the confounding other. Yet, while playing, reading, writing, telling stories, viewing art, and photographing, the protagonists represent the other's unrepresentability through carefree linguistic or symbolic play and, in so doing, transform suffering into bliss. Melancholia, as presented in these texts, therefore marks a transitional psychic state between the ethic-less narcissistic tendency to internalize otherness into sameness and the ethical, pleasurable appreciation of difference; thus melancholia functions as a pre-ethical internal state.

Aesthetic activity wherein the subject plays with the symbolic or language, always deferring closure and thereby pluralizing meanings, constitutes, I believe, what Dawne McCance refers to in *Posts: Re Addressing the Ethical* as the "postmodern ethical practice" (103). McCance asserts that the postmodern subject's and text's attempts to "bring the body back to life" (McCance 103), that is, to revive unsayable semiotic alterity, becomes akin to "ethical analysis" which, she goes on to explain, "works as an unceasing deferral, 'that's not it' and 'that is still not it,' because it reaches out to 'something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and

beyond nomenclatures and ideologies' (Kristeva, *New French Feminisms* 137)" (McCance 103). Otherwise stated, to the extent that the postmodern self and text remain "without the refuge of religious representations, and so without the defense of an idealized lifegiving mother" (McCance 103), the postmodern "ethical task" records and dramatizes "the crisis of the unified self [and text]" (McCance 103), which, McCance adds, oftentimes provokes "the melancholy of the 'postmodern ethical'" (McCance 103). Indeed, McCance's notion of a postmodern melancholia represents the obverse of, what she calls, a modern melancholia. She considers Kristeva's notion of the self's and the text's propensity to abject<sup>21</sup> the semiotic body or (m)other, in order to sustain narcissistic wholeness,<sup>22</sup> as the cause of a modern

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<sup>21</sup>In an interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch and Lucienne J. Serrano, Kristeva offers a fairly concise definition of *abjection* which she treats at length in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Abjection, Kristeva explains, is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so--whence the element of crisis which the notion of abjection carries with it (Barruch and Serrano 135-36).

<sup>22</sup>Most modern philosophy and literature, Gray Kochhar-Lindgren argues, valorize symbolic narcissistic identity in self and text. Indeed, Kochhar-Lindgren finds that Descartes's philosophy of subjectivity, which, he notes,

melancholia. Contrariwise, the postmodern self and text, for McCance, negate or reject the unified self that subsequently instigates a *postmodern* melancholia.

[T]he melancholy of the 'postmodern ethical' is not . . . the melancholy that results from the modern subject's reification and repression of the body as dead, and as a threat to be abjected. . . . But in 'postmodern' (poetic, psychoanalytic, feminist, aesthetic) practices, the body comes back to life. For the heterogeneity of the 'postmodern text,' she [Kristeva] says, is the heterogeneity of the signifying body, released ('resurrected'?) from its murderous Cartesian enclosure. If, however, 'postmodern' practices bring the body to life, they do so by putting the unified subject to death: the unified self perishes (McCance 103).

However, in interpreting Kristeva's "postmodern practices" as ethical processes that completely destroy the narcissistic sense of self-identity, McCance appears to overlook Kristeva's claim that the subject and text oscillate between a *sense of identity, of meaning or the symbolic*, on the one hand, and an experience of nonidentity, of nonmeaning or the semiotic, on the other hand. As Kristeva insists throughout her works, this ambivalence in self and text indeed underscores the continuing presence of

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attempted to "ensure both self-identity and epistemological veracity" and which "construct[ed] a subject severed from the world and from its body" (Kochhar-Lindgren 4), inscribes the narcissistic subject at "the center of modernity" (Kochhar-Lindgren 5). The overwhelming acceptance of or belief in narcissistic "self-identity" in modern society eventually led to, Kochhar Lindgren concludes, the commanding presence of the selfsame in modern literature as well.



a unified identity and of meaning in the formation of the revolutionary subject and text, respectively. Bearing this in mind, instead of depicting the postmodern subject's and text's ethical consideration of alterity as a process that "kills" the unified subject and, as a result, provokes a new type of melancholia, as McCance does, we should describe the postmodern or, rather, the revolutionary practice as a *reworking* of the narcissistic "Cartesian enclosure" characteristic of both the modern self and text that elicits pleasure and thus works through melancholia.

According to Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, some modern fiction and especially postmodern novels incorporate Cartesian, narcissistic notions of subjectivity in order to "transmute" them (Kochhar-Lindgren 4). In fact, postmodern practices are unable to "transcend" or to "overcome" those that are modern, declares Richard Begam in *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*. Following Jacques Derrida's position that we can never be outside modernism, or what Derrida calls "Western metaphysics" and calling on the ideas of Gianni Vattimo in *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, Begam asserts that postmodern philosophy and fiction do not completely break with modern notions and literature; rather, the postmodern "reworks" from within modernism. Consequently, the postmodern is not,

as many conclude, "antimodern." By claiming that Kristeva's postmodern practices go against and completely undo the modern notion of a unified self, McCance, in effect, is calling Kristeva's work "antimodern." Thus, she places Kristeva's writings outside the modern--which is an impossible task, according to Derrida and Begam--and perpetuates the postmodern tendency to oppose rather than rework modern concepts. Indeed, as Begam insists, we must not forget that "the very word post(modern) literally contains within itself what it seeks to displace" (Begam 6).

Reiterating Derrida's positions, Begam sees postmodern writing as "simultaneously practicing two forms of deconstruction--one that works critically within the tradition and one that projects itself imaginatively beyond tradition. This 'new writing,'" he adds, "necessarily places its practitioner in the no-man's-land that lies between modernism and antimodernism" (Begam 5). As the three novels to be studied in this dissertation thematize the ambivalent self and practice the ambiguous text, which, as Kristeva repeatedly reminds us, include instances of *identity* and *meaning* which are periodically undermined, these fiction narratives "work critically within the tradition" in an attempt to go "beyond" it. In so doing, *Un Balcon en forêt*, *La Nuit sacrée*, and *Opéra muet* occupy the simultaneously

difficult and exhilarating in-between space that is neither modern nor antimodern but simply postmodern or, as I call it, revolutionary and ethical. The following chapters examine how each novel presents not only the corresponding indeterminacy in the revolutionary self and text but, more importantly, both the melancholic and creative ethical dimensions of the ambiguous text and of the ambivalent self.

Acclaimed for the acuity and gracefulness of his prose as it echoes nineteenth-century Romantic themes while poetically underscoring history and geography, Julien Gracq's oeuvre is not normally associated with psychoanalytic criticism. However, the undeniable glimpses of narcissism and melancholia in *Un Balcon en forêt* recently generated new and perceptive psychoanalytic analyses by Didier Anzieu in "Julien Gracq, les figures de la position dépressive et le procès de la symbolisation," by Carol Murphy in *The Allegorical Impulse in the Works of Julien Gracq*, and by Elizabeth Cardonne-Arlyck in *La Metaphore raconte*. Continuing along the same lines as these three pioneering critical texts, Chapter Two of this dissertation proposes a new psychoanalytic reading of Gracq's *Un Balcon* that not only considers the novel's thematization of an ethical self in difference, but also how textual play both

reflects and may provoke a psychic state of difference in the writer and reader.

Winner of the Goncourt prize in 1987 for his novel *La Nuit sacrée*, Tahar Ben Jelloun is a celebrated Moroccan novelist and poet whose choice to write in French adds a cultural dimension to the notion of writing difference. Indeed, *La Nuit sacrée* includes the silences, breaks, repetitions, Arabic words and phrases characteristic of the Moroccan oral narration in the village circle or *halqa* that disrupt and fragment the Western novel. Thus, the Maghreb oral tradition embedded in a French-language novel renders *La Nuit sacrée* a "novel in difference" in both the cultural and textual sense. Chapter three highlights the analogies between this text in difference, which is, in fact, a fictional autobiography, and the narrator's self in difference.

A professor of philosophy turned novelist, Sylvie Germain's recently-recognized novels are heavily influenced, as she herself admits, by Levinas's notions of an "éthique de l'autre." Her short novel *Opéra muet* is written in an understated prose and figures a realistic portrayal of a deeply depressed photographer that diverges from her usual baroque style and abundant mythical allusions which tend rather more towards magical realism. Thematizing the

artistic struggle between melancholia and potentially ethical aesthetic activity, this novel's outcome serves as a provocative counterpoint to Gracq's and Ben Jelloun's texts.

CHAPTER 2  
THE FORTIFIED SELF AND TEXT IN DIFFERENCE IN JULIEN GRACQ'S  
*UN BALCON EN FORÊT*

A contemporary French writer, Julien Gracq published his first novel *Au Chateau d'Argol* in 1938. Since then, Gracq has written several novels, *récits*, prose poetry, a play, as well as literary essays. His work has received wide critical acclaim and has earned him both the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1951<sup>1</sup> for his novel *Le Rivage des Syrtes* and the publication of his *oeuvre* in Gallimard's distinguished *Pléiade* series in 1989. A retired teacher of history and geography at a Paris *lycée*, Julien Gracq often incorporates meaningful geographic settings of his own past in his narrative fiction that help create, as Richard Cardinal calls it, a "hypnotic atmosphere." This strange mood in Gracq's novels, Cardinal elaborates, "sustains a

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<sup>1</sup>Although he won the Prix Goncourt in 1951, Gracq refused to accept the award on the grounds that literary prizes represent the over-commercialization of literature. In a radio interview, Gracq quotes Henriot, a literary critic, when he states, "'Les prix littéraires sont une question qui intéresse la librairie, non la littérature'. Ce dont je me plains, c'est que ces affaires de librairie en arrivent, par intermédiaire des prix littéraires, à influencer la littérature dans un sens qui, personnellement, ne m'est pas sympathique" ("Sur *Un Balcon en forêt*" 213).

curious tension amid torpor, the sensation of being on the brink of either catastrophe or sublime fulfillment" (Cardinal 354).

Published in 1958, Gracq's *Un Balcon en forêt* exemplifies Cardinal's characterization of the indeterminate tonality of Gracq's fictional narratives insofar as this novel's spatial and temporal settings evoke a paradoxical ambiance of anxiety and peacefulness. The setting is France's serene, forested Franco-Belgian frontier during the tense months preceding Germany's invasion of France. The novel thus emphasizes borders: geographical and historical, in that the period of the *drôle-de-guerre* was a time of war-peace. According to Gracq, the tranquil Ardennes forest prior to the German *blitzkrieg* offers an historical ambiguous "climate" that matches the imaginary setting typically found in his other fictional works--"celui d'une espèce de vacance, de l'attente d'un événement, d'un événement qui est souvent catastrophique, par exemple la guerre" ("Sur *Un Balcon en forêt*" 214).

Ambiguity also marks several other aspects of the text. For instance, the central image of the *maison forte* or blockhouse functions as both safehaven and deathtrap for the protagonist and his fellow soldiers. As Gracq's depiction of the blockhouse in various interviews intimates, the

blockhouse's internal division between comfortable living quarters on the ground floor and a confining, ominous underground fort incites contradictory affects of placidity and fear in the characters. In Gracq's own words, "[la maison forte,] c'[est] un symbole très expressif de la drôle de guerre" ("Sur *Un Balcon en forêt*" 217); "le blockhaus est une image parlante, ni guerre, ni paix; la paix à l'étage, la guerre au sous-sol, ce que les deux se superposent constamment l'un à l'autre" ("Julien Gracq, la chanson du guetteur").<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the protagonist, Grange, while in the temporary role of French military officer, oscillates between discomfort and pleasure as he commands and lives with a small group of soldiers in the blockhouse. From October of 1939 to May of 1940, the protagonist's distress gradually increases as he waits for the enemies to attack his blockhouse. His sense of angst, however, is interrupted by moments of enjoyment: walks in the forest, conversations

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<sup>2</sup>Gracq's portrayal of the *maison forte* as a *balcon* both in the title and throughout the text further emphasizes the spatial ambiguity of the *fortin* insofar as the balcony denotes both a lookout tower from where to monitor the German invasion as well as an area of rest and contemplation. In Mitrani's documentary, Gracq explains why he chose the balcony imagery for the title of this novel: "... le balcon parce qu'on s'y met pour regarder de loin quelque chose en espèce d'invasion et puis parce que c'est un lieu de loisir aussi."



with fellow soldiers at the blockhouse, afternoons spent at the village café, long naps and visits to his lover's house.

Yet, in addition to describing the overall state of ambivalence in France at the outset of World War II, the indeterminacy prevalent in the novel highlights a psychic and textual ambivalence; that is to say, the ambiguity which is evident at all levels of Gracq's novel presents both the self and text in difference. Congruent with Kristeva's claims, psychic or linguistic ambivalence can be seen to facilitate an ethical stance in this work. I contend that *Un Balcon* thematizes the protagonist's torturous path to self-awareness and relations with others by highlighting Grange's limited narcissism, melancholia, and creative play. Indeed, these three psychic processes help the protagonist foster a self in difference who eventually becomes open to and respectful of alterity. At the same time, the novel's indecisive language which defers meaning and closure creates a text in difference. Thus, while examining how *Un Balcon* thematizes the self's gradual espousal of psychic otherness, this chapter also focuses on how the instances of textual ambiguity in this fictional narrative exemplify the practice of writing difference.

Psychic Ambivalence as Self-Fortification

*Un Balcon*'s ambiguous frontier setting suggests the liminality of Grange's psychic space which encompasses both a seemingly peaceful, unified identity and the invading unconscious other or semiotic stranger within. As Kristeva posits in *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, the threatening external "stranger," in this case the other characters Grange encounters, most notably his lover Mona, stimulates the subject's internal *étranger* or unconscious feelings to which the subject then reacts with either anxiety or pleasure. "Qu'elle soit troublée ou joyeuse, l'expression de l'étranger signale qu'il est 'en outre'. La présence d'une telle frontière interne à tout ce qui se montre réveille nos sens les plus archaïques par un goût de brûlure" (*Étrangers à nous-mêmes* 12). In light of Kristeva's conflation of the external *étranger* or foreign other with Freud's internal *étrangeté* or the unconscious other within, this text's wartime frontier setting not only reflects but also heightens the protagonist's psychic borderland or split which Grange alternately either represses or accepts. As we shall see, his openness to the other, at first, entails a passive, painful state, but then ultimately involves an exhilarating, active experience of freedom. This chapter examines Grange's changing responses to his sense of

alterity, starting with his tendency to suppress and reject these strange feelings.

Like the hostile invading German other, who eventually fragments France and the French, the semiotic stranger within the protagonist may also pose a threat to his psychic status. If the internal stranger over-powers and destroys the subject's symbolic identity, the unchecked sense of otherness may bring about psychic disintegration, i.e., psychosis; hence Grange's anxious need to repress the semiotic other. In fact, Kristeva's notion of the semiotic is tied to the Freudian concept of the death drive. Kristeva bases her concept of the split self, which is already divided even before the subject's entry into society or the Symbolic Order, on the Freudian theory of ambiguous life and death drives. According to Kristeva, the subject's fluctuations between life drives and death drives entail a pre-Oedipal alternation between unity with and rejection of the mother's body. This state of difference later becomes the socialized subject's vacillation between a comforting sense of symbolic self-unity and strange feelings of otherness, or, in Kristeva's terms, of semiotic negativity. Kristeva writes,

Il s'agit donc de fonctions sémiotiques pré-Oédiennes, de décharges d'énergie qui lient et orientent le corps par rapport à la mère. Insistons sur le fait que la 'pulsion' est toujours déjà ambiguë, assimilante et destructrice à la fois; ce dualisme. . .

fait du corps sémiotisé un lieu de scission permanente (Révolution 26).

Kristeva refers to this original space of pre-Oedipal mother-child relations wherein the child displays "ambiguous" drives towards the mother as the "semiotic chora" which is "the place of the maternal law before the [Symbolic] Law" (Oliver 46).<sup>3</sup> Since these pre-Oedipal or semiotic drives continue after the subject's entry into the Symbolic, it follows then that the predominance of the death drive in these semiotic drives also exists in the Oedipalized subject's irruptions of otherness.

[L]a chora sémiotique [est] sur la voie de la destruction, de l'agressivité et de la mort. Car si on a pu décrire la pulsion comme une structure séparée en

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<sup>3</sup>In *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Kristeva proposes that semiotic processes which stem from pre-Oedipal, non-linguistic bodily drives or energy charges alternate with instances of inactivity, thus comprising the "chora." "Charges 'énergétiques' en même temps que marques 'psychiques', les pulsions articulent ainsi ce que nous appelons une chora : une totalité non-expressive constituée par ces pulsions et leur stases en une motilité aussi mouvementée que réglementée" (Révolution 23). The moments of stasis in the chora constitute early, pre-Oedipal versions of the Oedipalized subject's experiences of stability and unity. Thus, the chora's fluctuation between drives and stases, which is the infant's corporeal experience as regulated by the mother or caregiver, prefigures and incites the establishment of the Symbolic Order and its subject consisting of both symbolic aspects (i.e., a sense of stable identity) and semiotic components (i.e., corporeal energy charges that break identity), which are controlled by the Symbolic or paternal Law. "The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora" (Kristeva, *Révolution* 27).

elle-même ou contradictoire, à chaque fois 'positive' et 'négative', un tel dédoublement est censé engendrer une 'onde destructrice' dominante qui caractérise la pulsion avant tout autre trait: Freud marque que la plus pulsionnelle est la pulsion de mort. De sorte que le terme de pulsion désignera des charges contre des stases" (*Révolution* 27).

Thus, after Oedipalization, the resurfacings of the semiotic are momentary appearances of the death drive that, if augmented in number, may completely "destroy" the symbolic structures which provide the subject with a sense of stasis and unity. In short, Kristeva considers the corporeal drive of rejection and destruction, i.e. the death drive, to be the "dominant" component in the semiotic sense of self whose frequent irruptions in a post-Oedipal subject may lead to psychic fragmentation.

However, I argue that *Un Balcon* depicts a subject who avoids such a psychic demise by sustaining an ongoing struggle between the semiotic other and symbolic identity. In fact, the *maison forte* image in this novel symbolizes the protagonist's internal division as a process of *fortifying* the psyche against complete fragmentation. In his seminal essay "Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique," Lacan claims that the subject's oneiric representations of self often take the form of fortified

structures enclosing opposing battlegrounds which point to the self's psychic split.

[L]a formation du je se symbolise oniriquement par un champ retranché, voire un stade--distribuant de l'arène intérieure à son enceinte, à son pourtour de gravats et de marécages, deux champs de lutte opposés où le sujet s'empêtre (*Ecrits* 97).

As this quote suggests, the subject's dreams of a "fortress" or "stadium" containing opposing fields may underscore an intrapsychic battle of self-constitution between the narcissistic illusion of a unified, stable self and a sense of chaotic otherness. This ongoing internal struggle thus parries total self-fragmentation. Although this inner battle only occasionally surfaces in dreams, Lacan posits that all subjects inherently sustain such an internal oscillation between an imaginary, stable identity and corporeal otherness as an essential means to psychic existence. In light of Lacan's analysis of contrasting spaces in dreams of fortresses, one can read the *maison forte's* peaceful, ordered living quarters covering over its dark, eerie subterranean fort in *Un Balcon* as representative of the "deux champs de lutte opposés," that is, the protagonist's vital psychic split as his fixed, narcissistic identity repeatedly veils a disquieting unconscious other. It appears then that, whereas the upper-level of the blockhouse emblemizes Grange's narcissistic self-image,

the underground fort or "cave" serves as metaphor for his hidden, Freudian "dark continent."<sup>4</sup> The hierarchical placement of these two spaces which constitute the *maison forte* thus reflects the protagonist's valorization of his narcissistic self-image over his sense of alterity.

In addition to mirroring the protagonist's divided psyche, the bi-level *maison forte* also heightens his internal difference, including his tendency to favor a stable, unified self-image. Throughout the text, the protagonist appears attracted to and comforted by the serenity and seeming stability of the *maison forte*'s upper-level. Life in the living quarters of the blockhouse "à l'étage" is familial, structured, and inviting. "[L]e sentiment plus vif qu'il [Grange] avait de rentrer chez lui lui coulait une chaleur dans les membres: d'avance il s'imaginait son monde installé autour du poêle, dans la salle commune toute fumante" (Gracq 51). Grange often ponders fondly over "le bon ordre domestique à la maison forte, l'espèce de discipline assez libre qui s'y était établie" (114). Moreover, Grange appears mesmerized by the fortified building, especially by its apparent solidity--"un

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<sup>4</sup>The difference in visibility between the two sections of the blockhouse also suggests the contrast between the surface and latent structures of the text which this study attempts to unearth.

bloc de béton" (20)--and by its surprising strangeness.

"Grange devina une maison parmi les arbres, dont la silhouette lui parut *singulière*; une sorte de chalet savoyard, emmêlé dans les branches, tombé *comme un aérolithe* au milieu de ces fourrés perdus" (20) [emphasis added].

Indeed, the protagonist's fixation with the alien-looking external section of the *maison forte* recalls the subject's narcissistic assumption of its initially bizarre outer image, as outlined by Lacan in his mirror-stage theory of self-formation. Lacan contends that, during the mirror stage and thereafter, the subject assuages its anxiety, caused by its lack of cohesion due to the periodic return of unconscious, bodily drives, by identifying with an external unified image of self which becomes its ego or *moi*.<sup>5</sup> The *moi* functions then as an illusory, narcissistic self-image or identity that represses the strange and potentially threatening feelings of otherness within, that is to say, of the unconscious.<sup>6</sup> It seems then that the protagonist's

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<sup>5</sup>Despite basically referring to the same notion, Lacan uses "moi" rather than Freud's term "ego." Since I will draw from theorists who use "moi" and others who apply "ego," I will use the terms "ego" and "moi" interchangeably.

<sup>6</sup>More specifically, in his mirror-stage essay, Lacan posits the formation of this fictional, unified *moi* as an inherent process whereby the infant, between the ages of six and eighteen months, assumes the corporeal Gestalt of its own mirror-image or of its mother's or primary caretaker's imago. By identifying with this outer image of self, the



focus on and reaction to the pyramid-shaped, exposed section of the *maison forte* suggests his identification with this building as a means to reinforce his assumption of his own "big and symmetrical" outer form (Ragland-Sullivan 25) or *moi*.<sup>7</sup>

But in order for the visible section of the blockhouse to effectively contribute to his narcissistic sense of stability, Grange mistakenly insists on the unity and solidity of the blockhouse as sufficient assurance against a

child concomitantly suppresses the feelings of the unconscious and therefore of the actual fragmented self. (Lacan, *Ecrits* 93-95).

C'est que la forme totale du corps par quoi le sujet devance dans un mirage la maturation de sa puissance, ne lui est donnée que comme *Gestalt*, c'est-à-dire dans une extériorité où certes cette forme est-elle plus constituante que constituée, mais où surtout elle lui apparaît dans un relief de stature qui le fige et sous une symétrie qui l'inverse, en opposition à la turbulence de mouvements dont il s'éprouve l'animer (*Ecrits* 94-95).

<sup>7</sup>Although Lacan's "mirror stage" essay recounts the infant's pre-Symbolic, i.e. Imaginary, process of self-construction, Lacan argues, towards the end of this essay and in "L'Agressivité en psychanalyse," that the subject maintains these Imaginary self-images of a unified self throughout its lifetime. The Lacanian subject's *méconnaissance* of self as cohesive and stable, therefore, persists in the post-mirror-stage subject. Indeed, as Ragland-Sullivan points out, "[t]he imagistic and fantasmatic subject of identifications continues, nonetheless, to coexist (in a double inscription) with the subject of language and cultural codes throughout life" (Ragland-Sullivan 29). Consequently, this warrants my application of Lacan's mirror-stage theory in my reading of the adult (and, therefore, post-mirror-stage) protagonist's self-formation as presented in this novel.

German attack. In other words, thoughts of the blockhouse's imagined stability, like those of a unified *moi*, mask the reality of the blockhouse's (and the *moi*'s) fragility. Although Grange occasionally displays awareness and angst regarding the *maison forte*'s dismal state, he always suppresses these realizations and feelings with forced reassurances of the fort's sturdiness and strategic position. "[E]n somme cette fortification paresseuse rassurait plutôt : visiblement on ne s'attendait ici à rien de sérieux. Derrière ces forêts..." (Gracq 50). After being informed about the reinforcements on the banks of the nearby Meuse and thereby recognizing the imminence of the German invasion, Grange once again assumes the self-duping thoughts that support his belief in the blockhouse's safety.

A partir de ce choc désagréable commençait à jouer par réflexe tout un système de pensées de secours. Que la guerre pût venir un jour battre la maison forte, il se le représentait mal : le mouvement, dans cette machine lourde, solidement arrimée, prenait pour l'imagination l'aspect anormal, longuement combiné à l'avance, d'un déménagement. 'D'ailleurs, qui s'avise même d'en parler ? se disait-il en haussant les épaules. Personne n'y pense sérieusement' (Gracq 125-26).

Further, Grange disregards obvious signs as well as others' comments which point to the blockhouse's structural inadequacies. To the cavalry officer's mocking comment on the apparent fragility of the *fortin* which he compares to the near-indestructibility of the German tanks, Grange

retorts "'Je ne vois pas comment les chars passeraient par la forêt . . . Et ceci ferait tout de même des dégâts... De la pointe de sa chaussure, il désignait la culasse du canon" (Gracq 80-81), thus plainly conveying his relentless blind faith in the blockhouse's strategic placement and in its defensive capabilities.

The protagonist's distorted view of the *fortin* as a solid and reassuring structure brings to light Lacan's correlation between the subject's knowledge of self and his or her cognition of objects. In his essay "L'Agressivité en psychanalyse," Lacan describes the subject's perception of things as a "connaissance paranoïaque"--akin to the process of "méconnaissance" in self-formation<sup>8</sup>--whereby the subject fixates on the objects' "attributs de permanence, d'identité et de substantialité" (*Ecrits* 111). It appears then that the same "stagnation formelle" (*Ecrits* 111) or "fixation formelle" (*Ecrits* 111) occurs in the processes of both *moi*- and object-constitution. In *Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to "Ecrits,"* John P. Muller and William J. Richardson emphasize "méconnaissance humaine" as the correspondence between ego-construction and general human knowledge of

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<sup>8</sup>As we have already discussed, in his mirror-stage essay, Lacan posits self-formation as a process of miscognition whereby the subject mistakenly perceives itself as a whole, stable self or as its *moi*.

things. They state, "human knowledge is paranoiac because imaginary ego-properties are projected onto things; things become conceived as distorted, fixed, rigid entities. [...] [O]bjects themselves take on the rigid features of the ego" (33-34). Thus, Grange's misperception of the blockhouse functions as a reassuring projection of his own self-"méconnaissance," thereby helping sustain his illusory sense of a unified *moi*.

Moreover, references to the *maison forte*'s living quarters as a ship that guards Grange and his men from the vast, engulfing sea, whose endless flowing movement, as Kristeva posits, suggests the return of archaic semiotic feelings of nonintegration,<sup>9</sup> further highlight the role of the blockhouse's "étage" as the sturdy, protective structure which "armors" Grange against feelings of alterity. For instance, as Grange lies in bed one night, he compares the blockhouse to a tight ship at sail.

[L]a clef du blockhaus accrochée à la tête de son lit, il se plaisait à sentir la maison forte autour de lui dériver à travers la nuit en ordre de marche, étanche,

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<sup>9</sup>Based on Freud's notion of the pre-Oedipal self's "oceanic" feelings, Kristeva describes the return of the semiotic "comme une réunion avec la non-intégration archaïque aussi léthale que jubilatoire, 'océanique'" (*Soleil noir* 30). Moreover, the French phonetic play between "mer" and "mère" throughout the novel emphasizes the sea as literary symbol for the resurfacing of Grange's internal (m)other.

toute close sur elle-même, comme un navire qui ferme ses écoutilles (Gracq 140-41).

The notion of an armoring object in this scene recalls Lacan's idea that the subject's mirror image or maternal imago as well as certain objects hold a defensive role in the process of self-formation. Just as the subject's self-image or *moi* becomes "*l'armure . . . assumée d'une identité aliénante*" (*Écrits* 97) [emphasis added] that wards off the subject's feelings of fragmentation, the narcissistically-invested object, posits Lacan, also serves as an additional imaginary "armement" (*Écrits* 111).

However, instances of alterity continue to interrupt, intermittently, the protagonist's narcissistic sense of self. According to Ragland-Sullivan, the *moi* or narcissistic identity is unable to "close out" completely the return of the unconscious given that the *moi* comprises "inherent gaps, ambiguities, and scars . . . which surface in the speaking subject [the *je* which represents language and culture and thus translates the *moi*] and throw its apparent illusory and contradictory unity into question" (Ragland-Sullivan 43). In Kristevan terms, as we previously noted in this chapter, the resurfacings of the semiotic disrupt the calming symbolic image of self-unity which, moreover, often provokes anxiety in the subject.

Early on in the text, during his routine inspections of the basement or *fortin*, the strangeness and size of the room immediately instigate Grange's mixed sense of unease and of security, but with a predominance of the former. Indeed, the images of the underground fort suggest an ambiguous womb-tomb space.

Lorsqu'il avait rabattu sur lui la lourde porte de coffre-fort, il s'arrêtait un instant sur le seuil, et jetait sur les murs et sur le plafond écrasé qui faisait rentrer d'instinct la tête dans les épaules un coup d'oeil qui n'allait jamais sans malaise: il était envahi par une sensation intense de dépaysement. C'était l'exiguité de cette pièce qui saisissait d'abord: l'oeil la raccordait mal aux dimensions extérieures de l'ouvrage; l'impression de réclusion en était rendue oppressante: le corps remuait là-dedans comme l'amande sèche dans le noyau. Puis venait le sentiment vivant -- Grange songeait combien le mot était expressif -- du bloc étanche, soudé autour de vous -- sentiment que donnait la fraîcheur surie qui tombait sur les épaules, la sécheresse fade, asceptique de l'air, les bavures minces du béton giclant aux jointures du coffrage qui couraient autour du réduit en fines nervures, soudant le sol aux murs et au plafond (Gracq 33-34).

The comparison of his body to an almond within its shell and the analogy of the cracks in the walls, ceilings and floors to 'thin nerves,' which suggests the anatomical contiguity of a womb's interior lining, intimate the imagined state of a fetus inside a womb. However, with the exception of a fleeting "sentiment vivant," Grange's angst persists as he scrutinizes the *fortin*, thereby forboding the room's eventual function as deadly trap for Grange and his soldiers

and even as crypt for two of the soldiers. The image of an almond tightly enclosed within its shell then may also allude to a corpse within a coffin. In fact, Sheila Gaudon points out that the qualification of the almond as "sèche" conveys an image of death which is echoed throughout most of the text's imagery, most notably, for Gaudon, in the novel's forest setting (Gaudon 146). This underground room, in effect, increasingly stirs up the protagonist's feelings of strangeness and of anxiety. Thus, whereas the upper living quarters of the *maison forte* elicit moments of serenity and stability in Grange that strengthen his narcissistic self-image, the basement of the same building, contrariwise, evokes instances of dread and confusion which connote irruptions of otherness. Gracq's description of the *maison forte* as "la paix à l'étage, la guerre au sous-sol" ("Julien Gracq, la chanson du guetteur"), in fact, underscores the double nature of this emblem of the self. Since Grange's visits to the underground fort regularly incite his feelings of semiotic alterity to which he then immediately reacts with anxiety and nausea, he correspondingly refers to these bouts of deep angst as "'descendre dans le blockhaus'" (Gracq 147).

Towards the end of the novel, when Grange and his men are finally forced to flee into the "sous-sol" during "un

moment de panique" (Gracq 205), which clearly points to his "descent" into the space of corporeal drives or of the unconscious, Grange exhibits extreme dread which turns into aggressivity and disgust.

La destruction, il ne savait pourquoi, le scandalisait plus particulièrement : il donna un coup de pied dans les paperasses évacuées de son bureau -- un coup de pied rageur, qui le vengeait. 'Imbéciles ! songea-t-il encore avec une espèce d'impartialité large et écoeurée -- Sombres imbéciles !' Il n'eût pu dire très précisément à quoi il pensait : c'était plutôt une absolution gâteuse qui déboutait le monde de son recours, le renvoyait globalement à son chaos (Gracq 205-06).

His fit of rage and his revulsion indicate a reaction not only to the world's impending chaos, but also to his own self's return to a state of turmoil or of negativity. Sensing the unavoidable intrusion of both the external ("le monde" at war) and the internal (psychic) other as well as the concomitant "destruction" of the fort and of his narcissistic self-image, Grange's shock and disgust in this scene signify an experience of "abjection" as defined by Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Kristeva argues that in order to maintain a comforting narcissistic self-image, the subject, at times, undergoes feelings of nausea and of violence that signal the extreme process of "abjecting" the resurfacings of the archaic (m)other. Indeed, as Kristeva writes, "[j]e n'éprouve de l'abjection que si un Autre s'est planté en lieu et en place de ce qui sera 'moi' (*Pouvoirs de*



l'horreur 18). This "Autre" qualifies as the nauseating, angst-inducing abject to the extent that it ignores borders, positions, and rules and thereby perturbs identity, the system, and order in general (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur* 12); hence Grange's agonizing feelings of "destruction" and "chaos." It seems then that in addition to valorizing his narcissistic identity, the protagonist's anguish, repulsion, and fury are other means of repressing his alterity.

Hours later, while still hiding in the basement or "drôle de turne," the protagonist continues to abject his heightened feelings of oceanic otherness as he, once again, undergoes acute anxiety and nausea.

'Drôle de turne!' songea-t-il, atterré, et il plissa les yeux et la bouche avec le mouvement commençant de la nausée; le coeur lui tournait, il sentait clapoter en lui une lie douceâtre, bourbeuse, qui était les eaux basses du courage. Il éteignait la lampe : aussitôt l'angoisse se dissipa un peu. . . (Gracq 220)

According to Kristeva, what appears to instigate the self's angst and urgent need to reject his or her unconscious other is his or her inability to represent the other.

Surgissement massif et abrupt d'une étrangeté qui, si elle a pu m'être familière dans une vie opaque et oubliée, me harcèle maintenant comme radicalement séparée, répugnante. Pas moi. Pas ça. Mais pas rien non plus. Un 'quelque chose' que je ne reconnais pas comme chose. Un poids de non-sens qui n'a rien d'insignifiant et qui m'écrase" (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur* 10).

Bearing Kristeva's analysis in mind, one may interpret the illuminated lamp in the above scene from *Un Balcon* as an

intimation of Grange's painful conscious effort to comprehend his "weight of non-sense," that is, his internal other's frustrating lack of logical meaning. Thus, by turning off the light, the protagonist seems to renounce his quest to understand or to name this strange otherness. Consequently, with the abandonment of his search for the comprehension of alterity comes a slight mitigation of his angst--"aussitôt l'angoisse dissipa un peu."

Insofar as the portentous underground section of the blockhouse enhances the protagonist's sense of otherness, while the upper-level of this fort fortifies his narcissistic self-image, the bi-level blockhouse heightens and thus brings to light Grange's psychic ambivalence or state of internal difference. Psychic ambivalence not only proves to be essential to Grange's process of self-formation to the extent that it prevents psychic fragmentation, as Lacan posits, but it also provides the inherent means to ethical relations with others, according to Kristeva. However, the subject must first recognize and embrace his or her psychic other in order to relate to the external other. As we have just highlighted in this section, despite always already living in a bifurcated state, the protagonist, nevertheless, displays his repeated attempts to suppress his split psyche insofar as he valorizes his narcissistic identity and rejects his sense of alterity. Only after

learning to acknowledge and to respect both the internal as well as the external other, a complex process that the remainder of this chapter traces, does Grange finally experience an *ethical* subject in difference.

### Limited Narcissism: Towards A Respect For the Other

Levinas contends that a limited type of narcissism, which he calls "egoism," is essential to the formation of an ethical self. As I noted in the opening chapter, Levinas's "egoist" self appropriates "les objets usuels, les nourritures, le monde même que nous habitons" (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 28) in order to form a corporeal and mental sense of self that precludes any attempt to incorporate a human other into the selfsame.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the narcissistic appropriation of usage-objects helps the subject individuate and eschew the need to unify with the human other that would only create an illusory sense of "totality." Instead, Levinas promotes a controlled narcissistic process of self-formation that leads to an ethical respect for the other. In *Un Balcon*, the many descriptions of sights (which include the external image of the *maison forte* already discussed above), of sounds, of

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<sup>10</sup>See Chapter 1 under the section entitled "Narcissism and the Ethical Self" for a more thorough examination of Levinas's "egoism."

smells, and of food experienced by the protagonist as part of his daily routine become the "objects" of the surrounding world which he incorporates and thereby constitutes a sense of subjectivity. Every morning, Grange slowly awakes to the familiar noises and sights of the cozy living quarters within the blockhouse.

Grange prolongea longtemps le demi-sommeil qui le retournait sur son lit de camp, dans l'aube déjà claire à toutes les vitres; depuis son enfance, il n'avait éprouvé de sensation aussi purement agréable: il était libre . . . Derrière sa porte, le remue-ménage placide d'une ferme qui s'éveille ajoutait à son bonheur; il l'engrenait dans une longue habitude. . . . Les branches de la forêt venaient toucher ses vitres. . . . Derrière la cloison, quelqu'un tisonnait le poêle; des chocs de ferblanterie parlaient plaisamment de café chaud (Gracq 22-23).

His afternoons also involve pleasant routines which entail regular views, sounds, and tastes.

Lorsqu'il faisait beau, il descendait souvent l'après-midi jusqu'au hameau des Falizes. A une demi-lieue de la maison forte, la minuscule route blanche débouchait sur une clairière fraîche, un alpage charmant où une douzaine de maisonnettes prenaient le soleil . . . [Grange] allait s'asseoir au Café des Platanes . . . Grange s'enfonçait dans son fauteuil de jardin, et plongeait en buvant son café à petit gorgées dans une espèce de béatitude songeuse (Gracq 30-31).

Grange's gratifying, tranquil surroundings and experiences contribute to his narcissistic process of individuation to which the text often alludes as Grange's sense of "freedom."

While incorporating objects to attain a corporeal and mental sense of existence, on the one hand, the protagonist discovers, on the other hand, that he is unable to

internalize the human other's difference into a sense of sameness. This is exemplified during his encounter and subsequent relationship with his lover, Mona. When he first meets Mona, Grange experiences a state of wonder vis-à-vis her irrefutable presence. "Où elle était, on le sentait, elle était toute. Quelle densité, se disait-il, prend le moment présent, à son ombre. Avec quelle force de conviction elle est là!" (59) Although struck by her undeniable physical existence--"elle était tout ce qu'il y a de plus éloigné du vaporeux: elle était soudain contre lui, pleine et ronde comme un petit caillou" (60), Grange finds that the words she uses to describe her past to him do not adequately depict her and, as a result, he immediately starts to acknowledge the impossibility of defining her strangeness. "Grange écoutait, mais ces détails restaient pour lui étrangement flottants. Les mots: 'un père', 'un mari' ne s'accrochaient pas à elle; ils venaient se poser sur elle un instant comme un vêtement qu'on prend et qu'on quitte, mais ils ne la concernaient pas" (59). "A chaque réplique à chaque mouvement des épaules et de la tête, l'idée qu'il se faisait d'elle sautait incroyablement" (57). In an attempt to appease his need to grasp her surprising difference, he suddenly wants to call her by her name, as if her name were the magical word that could define her. "Il avait envie de

l'appeler par son nom" (Gracq 60). However, knowing Mona's name does not help him comprehend her alterity; thus, he immediately ceases trying to master her otherness which then subsequently instigates his unease with Mona's ineffable strangeness or, as Gracq writes, her lack of transparency or "limpidity." "[U]ne fois de plus Grange se sentit incertain et trouble. Elle était spontanée, mais elle n'était pas limpide; c'était les eaux printanières, toutes pleines de terre et de feuilles" (61). Yet, these disconcerting feelings gradually decrease in frequency as the initial murky quality of Mona's being is transformed, in Grange's eyes, into her thrilling and inspiring mystical characteristic. As he observes Mona and her maid during his first visit to her home, Grange is still more troubled and threatened by her unfathomable strangeness than "reassured:" "[p]armi les rires trop aigus, la haute flambée rouge de la cheminée découpait soudain deux démons rieuses, à peine rassurantes, lâchées dans le désordre de la maison d'apprenti sorcier" (65). Later on, however, Grange becomes enchanted by her magical or divine-like otherness as he sadly realizes that her wondrous presence in his life is only temporary given the imminence of the German invasion that will force them to part.

[C]'était plutôt une espèce fabuleuse, comme les licornes. 'Je l'ai trouvée dans les bois' songeait-il, et une pointe merveilleuse lui entraînait dans le coeur;

il y avait un signe sur elle: la mer l'avait flottée jusqu'à lui sur une auge de pierre; il sentait combien précairement elle était prêtée; la vague qui l'avait apportée la reprendrait' (116-17).

Finding Mona to be mystical rather than murky and, moreover, drawing pleasure from this strangeness, Grange ultimately accepts her enigmatic, that is, her ungraspable, alterity. Indeed, to the extent that he employs magical terms, Grange alludes to Mona's otherness in such a way that respects its mysterious and therefore indescribable quality.

But Grange comes to cherish Mona's alterity only after having learned to appreciate his own sense of otherness. Paradoxically, Grange's initial acknowledgement of Mona's undefinable alterity, while, at first, provoking anxiety, eventually incites him to embrace his equally unrepresentable internal other and, in turn, to respect as well as to care for the external other, Mona. As Kristeva proposes in *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, it is the other's exciting yet disquieting strangeness that triggers our own unconscious other to resurface and thus forces us to discover our otherness within. Only by acknowledging that one is "étranger à soi-même" can the subject then engage in ethical relations. Thus, as the self embraces both "l'étrangeté de l'autre et de soi-même," he or she lives "une éthique du respect pour l'inconciliable" (Kristeva, *Étrangers* 269) or, in other words, an ethics of (internal

and external) difference. Near the end of the novel, the protagonist finally understands that Mona's confounding otherness encouraged him to appreciate his own sense of difference, that is, his experience of a *sujet-en-procès*.

[L]e souvenir de Mona lui traversa la tête avec le parfum des branches de mai: il commençait à comprendre ce que Varin avait deviné à sa manière, ce que sans le savoir elle était venue démuseler dans sa vie: ce besoin de faire sauter une à une les amarres, ce sentiment de délestage et de légèreté profonde qui lui faisait bondir le coeur et qui était celui du lâchez tout. 'J'ai toujours été rattaché par un fil pourri' se dit-il avec un petit rire de gorge (Gracq 211-12).

In this scene, Grange's sudden memory of Mona, while experiencing a euphoric sense of freedom, suggests his awareness of both Mona's and his own otherness and therefore of his ambivalence that is, of the inherent movement of his psyche. As a result of this self-(re)discovery, Grange becomes cognizant of the fact that he previously felt "moored" and "tied." Indeed, this past sense of immobility or rigidity alludes to his former over-valorization of a static narcissistic identity and the concomitant suppression of his unconscious alterity. In other words, as he finally enjoys his liberating sense of difference, the protagonist realizes his former attachment (by way of "un fil pourri") to a comforting, yet stifling, narcissistic self-image or self-enclosure. What Mona's strangeness helps "démuseler" is Grange's notion of an always unified and stable self



that, subsequently, allows him to embrace, rather than abject, the other within. Grange's relief and feelings of lightness suggest a newfound pleasure, instead of fear, with regard to his internal sense of movement, change, or difference. No longer assuming that his periodic semiotic resurfacings threaten his complete psychic disintegration, Grange cherishes his temporary irruptions of otherness towards the end of the text.

Yet, in order to achieve this eventual enjoyable openness to alterity, Grange undergoes a slow process of ethical awakening of which the novel, I contend, delineates the various stages. First, as just examined in this section, the protagonist experiences limited narcissism whereby he incorporates daily objects, but not others, in order to attain a sense of self without obliterating the other's alterity. In fact, Grange's controlled narcissism allows for the external other's strangeness to stir up his own usually suppressed sense of alterity. As I next discuss, Grange's growing sadness or melancholia signals his passive, albeit painful, nascent openness to his internal otherness. Finally, his creative childlike moments of play in the forest encourage him to embrace the other within and without. *Un Balcon* then presents the path to ethical becoming as a complex process of changing reactions to

alterity that range from violent rejection to joyful acceptance with an interim state of deep sadness.

Melancholic (In)Difference: A Passive Relation to the Other

In *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie*, Kristeva argues that the melancholic subject, living in acute depression, usually ignores the source of his or her sorrow. Indeed, there are moments throughout *Un Balcon en forêt* in which the protagonist is suddenly overcome by an inexplicable sense of desolation. In the beginning of the novel, Grange undergoes this enigmatic "mélancolie"--"[i]l sentait battre en lui une petite vague inerte et désespérée qui était comme le bord des larmes" (Gracq 32)--as he listens to "la récitation d'une dizaine de gamines, dans la minuscule école" (Gracq 32). This apparent connection between memories of his childhood past and a sudden, overwhelming, mystifying sadness intimates his painful sense of loss that he cannot explain. Other apparently unaccountable moments of gloom reappear especially in the company of his lover, Mona, whose bleak moods and attitudes Grange unwittingly assumes. Indeed, when in the presence of Mona, the protagonist often engages in, as Cixous calls it, "brief identifying hugs and kisses" with the other's alterity (*La Jeune née* 88) which point to his initial

distressful experiences of otherness<sup>11</sup> without attempting to immediately repress them. One particular scene in *Un Balcon* literally displays Grange's identificatory hug with his lover's sense of alterity insofar as, while holding her in his arms, he momentarily mirrors Mona's feelings of strangeness, which, in turn, evoke his perplexing deep sadness.

Le froid tombait, et il passait dans la lumière oblique une nuance de tristesse soucieuse. Mona frissonnait sous sa courte veste fourrée : elle s'embrumait tout à coup. . . . Et quand il lui demandait à quoi elle pensait : -- Je ne sais pas. A la mort... Quelquefois elle roulait la tête sur son épaule, et quelques secondes elle faisait contre lui ses sanglots pressés, si étranges, brusques comme la pluie d'avril. Brutalement, il sentait le froid le saisir. . . La terre autour d'eux paraissait soudain si éteinte, si glacée, que les pressentiments de Mona gagnaient Grange: il sentait la journée basculer d'un coup au fond d'un puits noir, et une eau grise, froide, monter en lui dont il remuait le goût fade dans sa bouche. . . 'Qu'est-ce que j'ai? se disait-il, le cœur lourd, Qui sait? c'est l'*angoisse crépusculaire*' (Gracq 121-22).

*Un Balcon* traces the gradual deepening of the protagonist's melancholia through increased presentations of Grange's apathy and alienation which delineate the general affective *indifference* characteristic of melancholics.<sup>12</sup> Starting with his sense of detachment towards the war--"il

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<sup>11</sup>As I mentioned in the first chapter, Cixous recognizes the difficulty and even suffering involved in remaining open to difference. See page 158 in *La Jeune née*.

<sup>12</sup>In *Soleil noir*, Kristeva refers to the melancholics' general sense of "indifférence" on page 63.

suivait la marche de la guerre avec une grande indifférence" (Gracq 49)--Grange's aching sense of solitude and lack of interest in the war worsen as his perception of a gaping distance between himself and the surrounding world seems to suggest.

Le monde lui paraissait soudain inexprimablement étranger, indifférent, séparé de lui par des lieues. Il lui semblait que tout ce qu'il avait sous les yeux se liquéfiait, s'absentait, évacuait cauteleusement son apparence encore intacte au fil de la rivière louche et huileuse, et désespérément, intarissablement, s'en allait--s'en allait (Gracq 151).

According to Kristeva, states of intense sadness, silence, and isolation, such as these, typify the melancholic's painful self-enclosure with the (m)other whose unrepresentability, in fact, causes a diminished use of language as well as an ongoing sense of dissatisfaction and depression. The inability to express one's lost pre-oedipal other, Kristeva goes on to explain in *Soleil noir*, renders it more of a "Chose" rather than a discrete object.<sup>13</sup> Thus, she writes, "le dépressif. . . s'enferme, inconsolable et aphasique, en tête à tête avec la Chose innommée" (*Soleil*

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<sup>13</sup>Kristeva explains that her use of "Chose" rather than "object" befits the non-representability of the pre-Oedipal (m)other. She writes,

Ce 'quelque chose' serait antérieur à l'objet discernable : horizon secret et intouchable de nos amours et de nos désirs, il prend pour l'imaginaire la consistance d'une mère archaïque que cependant aucune image précise ne réussit à englober (*Soleil noir* 157).

noir 23). As already discussed at length in the opening chapter, "the mourner" substitutes the (m)other with words and thereby recovers this archaic other through a gratifying process of linguistic mastery which, in turn, neutralizes the internal other, that is, renders the other as the same. By refusing to name the (m)other within, the melancholic, on the contrary, does not absorb alterity in language or as, Ziarek puts it, into "the immanence of linguistic totality" ("Kristeva and Levinas" 72). Consequently, the melancholic, as opposed to the mourner, shows nascent feelings of reverence for difference. But this incipient respect for the other may cause frustration and depression as the melancholic's inability to name the (m)other thus precludes him or her from ever attaining the narcissistic satisfaction that accompanies the appropriation of difference into sameness. I argue then that the scenes in *Un Balcon* which expose the protagonist's melancholia also evidence his incipient ethical stance as a reaction to otherness.

Grange's feelings of loneliness and grief, brought on by the resurfacing of an ungraspable internal other, become most notable during a particular solitary moment of quiet thought wherein he contemplates the presence of a strange and eerie moon.

Une idée bizarre se glissait dans l'esprit de Grange:  
il lui semblait qu'il marchait dans cette forêt

insolite comme dans sa propre vie. Le monde s'était couché comme un jardin des Olives, fatigué de craindre et de pressentir, saoulé d'angoisse et de fatigue, mais le jour ne s'était pas éteint avec lui : restait cette lumière froide et limpide, luxueuse, qui survivait au souci des hommes et paraissait brûler sur le monde évacué pour elle seule -- cette pupille déserte de nocturne qui s'entrouvrait avant l'heure et semblait vaguement regarder quelque part. Il faisait jour. C'était un étrange jour de limbes, lavé de la crainte et du désir, une lumière chaste, pareille à celle qui éclaire sans la rechauffer une lune morte (Gracq 154-55).

This bizarre "lune morte" indeed brings to mind Kristeva's depiction in *Soleil noir* of the indescribable, pre-Oedipal, maternal other as a "Soleil noir," an image that she borrows from Nerval's poem "El Desdichado." Kristeva argues that Nerval's "Black sun" provides a "métaphore éblouissante" (*Soleil noir* 22) for the lost maternal Thing insofar as Nerval's image suggests "une insistance sans présence, une lumière sans représentation" (*Soleil noir* 22) which parallels the (m)other's elusive quality. Conflating Nerval's poetic image with the self's feelings of alterity, she concludes, "la Chose est un soleil rêvé, clair et noir à la fois" (*Soleil noir* 22). In the above passage from Gracq, the equally strange and imperceptible light of the "lune morte" intimates the "insistence without presence" or the ongoing yet unrepresentable aspect of Grange's internal otherness. The image of Grange standing alone, experiencing "un étrange jour de limbes, lavé de la crainte et du désir"

while looking at a "lune morte" further suggests that the protagonist reacts to his unnameable psychic ambivalence or "limbo" with the melancholic's characteristic state of indifference. Moreover, like the Kristevan melancholic who lacks desire for any other as he or she remains alone with the lost "Soleil noir" or maternal Thing, the protagonist feels "lavé . . . du désir." Grange's silent contemplation of the "lune morte," combined with his indifference and general loss of desire, reveals his ethical melancholic refusal to name or, as Kristeva calls it, to "kill," i.e., to violently neutralize, the (m)other. Grange's comparison of his life to this lonely walk through an unusual (insolite) forest strangely illuminated by a "lune morte" thus signals his melancholic disposition.

The protagonist's solitary consideration of this "lune morte" also recalls "late classical antiquity's cosmological speculations in which melancholia is linked to Saturn--the planet of 'high contemplation, the star of the philosophers, magicians and hermits who live to the pleasure of God'" (Lepenies 12). Reminiscent of Antiquity's as well as of the Middle Age's connection of melancholia to Saturn, "la planète de l'esprit et de la pensée" (*Soleil noir* 17),<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Kristeva acknowledges the historic perception of melancholia as the thinking person's disease on pages 16 to 18 in *Soleil noir*.

Grange's pensive mood in the dim light of a "lune morte" or "Soleil noir" points to his melancholic predisposition for "high contemplation." In *Soleil noir*, Kristeva elaborates on past considerations of the intellectual capabilities and originality of melancholics when she discusses how the "hyperlucidité cognitive des déprimés" (*Soleil noir* 70) produces a signifying hyperactivity whereby the melancholic creates ingenious associations with words (*Soleil noir* 70). Kristeva contends that these "accélération associatives" offer the subject "une fuite hors de la confrontation avec une signification stable ou avec un objet fixe" (*Soleil noir* 70) that, in turn, destabilizes both language and the self. In addition to the above-quoted scene in the forest, Grange's trip along the Vienne river in Chinon occasions another perception of a "lumière étrange." Once again, this perception connotes *la Chose* or *le Soleil noir*, that is, a melancholic affect and incites not only "high contemplation" but also imaginative poetic play. While admiring the village's Renaissance ruins, Grange catches sight of a *Soleil-noir*-like light which instantly infuses him with creative inspiration or "un processus cognitif accéléré et créatif" (Kristeva, *Soleil noir* 70) typical of many melancholics, as he begins to imagine a "grand cortège" of "grands indésirables."



La ville ne lui pesait pas: elle lui semblait décrochée du temps, rafraîchie par une image d'Epinal fabuleuse. Une lumière étrange, jamais vue hésite un instant sur un coin du quinzième siècle. La herse du château de Chinon se relève: au son des trompettes, en grand cortège, on voit sortir des voûtes, comme la séquence médusante d'un jeu de tarots, le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie, flanqué de la Pucelle et de Barbe Bleue. Le monde s'est desserré à quelques-uns de ses joints essentiels; soudain le coeur bondit, la possibilité explose: les grandes routes, un instant, s'ouvrent aux 'grands indésirables' (Gracq 144).

In this fantasy of a fictional "grand cortège," Grange includes "le Prince d'Aquitaine à la Tour abolie," the exact description of the mythical figure as it appears word-for-word in the second line of Nerval's poem "El Desdichado." The distinct reference to Nerval's quintessential poem on melancholia, specifically, as Kristeva reads it, on the melancholic's poetic representation of the unrepresentable quality of the lost maternal Thing,<sup>15</sup> provides an interesting *mise-en-abyme* for Grange's own melancholic creativity. First of all, insofar as *le Prince d'Aquitaine* is grouped with *la Pucelle* and *Barbe Bleue*, all of whom were either excommunicated by the Church and/or publicly

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<sup>15</sup>Kristeva suggests that the list of names in Nerval's poem intimates the Thing's or (m)other's ineffability. "L'accumulation litanique, hallucinatoire de leurs noms propres laisse supposer qu'ils pouvaient avoir seulement valeur d'indices, morcelés et impossibles à unifier, de la Chose perdue" (*Soleil noir* 168). See Kristeva's perceptive reading of this poem in her chapter "Nerval, El Desdichado," *Soleil noir*, pp. 152-82.

executed,<sup>16</sup> Grange's image of these three "grands indésirables" released from an enclosed castle becomes an allegory for Grange's own internal and creative process of freeing the heretofore abjected or "killed" other. Secondly, in order to symbolize the unnameability of the psychic other or *la Chose*, Grange envisions not just one historical/mythical character exiting the castle beneath the peculiar light, but rather a surprising sequence of three figures who thus pluralize the representations of the other. In other words, the three individuals--"Le Prince d'Aquitaine," "la Pucelle," and "Barbe Bleue"--appearing in Grange's fictional image allude to the fact that no single character can adequately represent the Thing or alterity within. Characteristic of melancholics according to Kristeva, Grange plays with these signifiers by offering an odd juxtaposition of historical names all of which, in fact,

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<sup>16</sup>Indeed, in 1431, *la Pucelle*, i.e. Jeanne d'Arc, who was accused of sorcery, was sold by the French (the *Bourguignons*, in particular) to the English and then burnt at the stake. A fictional character in one of Charles Perrault's famous fairy tales, *la Barbe Bleue* is based on Gilles de Rais, a rich landowner who accompanied Jeanne d'Arc to the relief of Orléans in 1429 and who was later condemned by a Church court to public execution for sorcery and heresy, which, in actuality, alluded to his repeated acts of paedophilia and murders. Although "le Prince d'Aquitaine" may refer to any of several princes of that kingdom, William IX of Aquitaine, the First Troubadour, fits this group insofar as he too was excommunicated from the Church.

refer to other names, that is, multiply named others in an attempt to avoid a stable signified;<sup>17</sup> in so doing, these three names or signifiers capture the ineffable aspect of unconscious otherness. It follows then that Grange's reaction at the end of this scene--"soudain le coeur bondit, la possibilité explose"--intimates his excitement as he realizes the endless possible creative depictions of the unsayable other.

The protagonist's unusual combination of "undesirable" and rejected others followed by his sudden elation seems to suggest a liberating play with his habitually repressed semiotic other. In fact, Kristeva considers creative symbolic activities to be "ces solutions sublimatoires de nos crises" (*Soleil noir* 35) which although do not quite function as "antidépresseur[s]," (35) provide a sense of "survie" or even of "résurrection" (*Soleil noir* 62) which I

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<sup>17</sup>As already mentioned in the previous footnote, *Le Prince d'Aquitaine*, *La Pucelle*, and *Barbe Bleue* refer to other names. The leading figure, le prince d'Aquitaine, however, may allude to any of the princes of this region or even of France, other than William IX. For instance, Chinon, the setting wherein the protagonist imagines these three figures, was the place where Jeanne d'Arc and probably Gilles de Rais met Charles VII of France to escort him to Reims where he was crowned King of France. Perhaps, then, "le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie" also symbolizes Charles VII and his crumbling kingdom given the powerful English invasion of France at the time. Thus, the ambiguous signifier "le prince d'Aquitaine" offers many possible signifieds.

interpret to mean a pleasurable (re)discovery of one's psychic ambivalence or state of difference. Rather than remain painfully silent, refusing to define the ineffable other, the ethical melancholic protagonist engages in brief moments of poetic activity, such as the one above, which name not the unsayable other but its unnameability. In so doing, these instances of linguistic creativity still maintain a consideration of otherness, while generating lighthearted feelings of play that attenuate Grange's melancholic suffering. Such aesthetic activity or play with language becomes then a freeing process that allows the protagonist to work through his distressful inability to ever name and therefore master alterity. Never attempting to control otherness in this scene, the protagonist ethically plays with it.

Further, Grange's strange, linguistically indeterminate fantasy in the above-quoted scene from *Un Balcon* exemplifies Kristeva's notion of an ethical literary practice or, as I refer to it, a text in difference. By pluralizing or, as Kristeva writes, "pulverizing" meaning, the protagonist's poetic depiction of his vision becomes what Kristeva calls an "ethical textual practice" (*Révolution* 203). According to Kristeva, stable meaning in texts help uphold the narcissistic notion of a unified self. Thus, insofar as

Grange's imaginary scene in the ruins of Chinon dissolves the linguistic narcissistic fixation with a single meaning, it also undermines the narcissistic perception of a whole self and instead heightens feelings of internal difference. Grange's ambiguous fictional scene, in fact, functions as a mirror in the text to the extent that, as I discuss later in this chapter, *Un Balcon* is itself a text in difference. Indeed, like Gracq's novel, Grange's fantasy is an ethical text in difference which both reflects and evokes a self in difference.

While gazing at himself in the mirror at the end of the novel, Grange's inability to see a distinct, unified image of self marks his recognition not only of an undefinable split psyche but also of his life-long *méconnaissance* of himself as whole, stable, and conscious. The darkness of the room renders his self-image an obscure, uncanny shadow which appears to symbolize the strange (*unheimliche*), yet now increasingly familiar (*heimliche*), archaic (m)other within.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in the following quote, Grange appears to

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<sup>18</sup>Freud points to the subject's tendency to repress the always-already-there, that is, the familiar unconscious other when he defines the unconscious as the uncanny or *unheimliche* given that this term, he explains, paradoxically connotes both the familiar and the unfamiliar. Freud writes,

linguistic usage has extended *das heimliche* [the familiar] into its opposite, *das unheimliche* [the unfamiliar]; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new

reverse the process of repression of unconscious alterity by allowing the strange to become, once again, familiar.

Une faible ombre grise semblait venir à lui du fond de la pièce et lui faire signe; il leva la main: l'ombre dans le miroir répéta le geste avec une lenteur exténuée, comme si elle flottait dans des épaisseurs d'eau; il se pencha en avant jusqu'à coller presque le nez contre le miroir--mais l'ombre restait floue, mangée de partout par le noir : la vie ne se rejoignait pas à elle-même: il n'y avait rien, que ce tête à tête un peu plus proche avec une ombre voilée qu'il ne dévisageait pas (Gracq 251-52).

No longer does he clearly see a unified, erect image of self in the mirror, but rather stares at "l'ombre floue"--an image that remains true to his semiotic, unrepresentable alterity which is unnameable and therefore "nothing"--"il n'y avait rien." Moreover, the phrase "la vie ne se rejoignait pas à elle-même" seems to suggest that Grange has come to realize that his internal sense of division does not correspond to the external image of self which, from the mirror-stage onwards, provided Grange with an illusory sense of stable subjectivity. Lacan points to such a moment in which the subject becomes aware of the imaginary status of the *moi* as the instance of "truth." Ragland-Sullivan explains that, for Lacan, "'Truth' is to be found, in part,

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or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression (On Creativity 148).

See also endnote 9 in Chapter 1 for further discussion of Freud's "uncanny."

in the je's [i.e. the subject of speech's] recognition of the fictional structuration of the moi." (50) This scene therefore displays the protagonist's moment of self-awareness or Lacanian "truth" as he realizes that his narcissistic image of self is indeed a fantasy.

From this point on, the protagonist calls the internal other, exclusively, "no one" or "nothing." The repetitive references to the other as "rien" and "personne" in the last three pages of the text underscores Grange's awareness of his psychic alterity as well as of the impossibility to ever name it. "Rien n'avait pris corps" (Gracq 250); "'Il n'y a rien à attendre de plus. Rien d'autre'" (Gracq 251); "[I]l n'y avait rien" (Gracq 251); "Il n'arrivait rien. Il n'y avait personne" (Gracq 252); "'Rien, sans doute'" (Gracq 253). However, the reiteration of "personne" and "rien" may also intimate Grange's creative void and his concomitant return to a state of melancholic indifference. This novel then seems to suggest that it is creative activity, that is, the original, always changing play with language, i.e., the text in difference, and not the inane repetition of the other's absence, that achieves a successful sublimation of pain. Indeed, in addition to linguistic play, *Un Balcon's* numerous depictions of Grange's diversions in the forest

further underline the liberating potential of physical play, whether with or without language.

Playing Through (À Travers) Melancholic Pain

Much like his instance of poetic inspiration, the protagonist's moments of play in the woods evoke his pleasurable feelings of rebirth. Grange's many strolls in the Ardennes forest either alone or accompanied by Hervouët, a fellow soldier, become akin to childhood adventures in nature; these walks in the silent, shadowy forest at night transform into magical, childlike times of play during which the surrounding environment--which alludes to the Freudian "dark continent" or unconscious other--stimulates his sense of otherness without causing him distress. On the contrary, he joyfully embraces the semiotic resurfacings while cavorting in the woods.

Le silence du lieu devenait alors presque magique. Un sentiment bizarre l'envahissait chaque fois qu'il allumait sa cigarette dans ce sous-bois perdu : il lui semblait qu'il larguait ses attaches ; il entrait dans un monde racheté, lavé de l'homme, collé à son ciel d'étoiles de ce même soulèvement pâmé qu'ont les océans vides. 'Il n'y a que moi au monde', se disait-il avec une allégresse qui l'emportait. Ils restaient là quelquefois assez longtemps sans rien dire. . . . A partir de là ils cessaient de parler . . Grange regardait le front tiré par l'attention et par le sentiment d'un suspens étrange. Il y avait un charme puissant à se tenir là, si longtemps après que minuit avait sonné aux églises de la terre, sur cette gâtine sans lieu épaissement saucée de flaques de brume et toute mouillée de la sueur confuse des rêves, à l'heure où les vapeurs sortaient des bois comme des esprits.



Quand il faisait signe de la main à Hervouët, et que tous deux un moment suspendaient leur souffle, le grand large des bois qui les cernait arrivait jusqu'à leur oreille porté sur une espèce de musique basse et remuée. . . (Gracq 97-100)

As this quote illustrates, Grange's carefree nighttime romps through the forest are primarily conducted in silence.

Rather than use poetic language to embrace and play with the ineffable other that reappears while he is in the mystical woods, he quietly takes pleasure in his difference through his senses of sight, touch, smell, and hearing<sup>19</sup> as well as through his imagination. Again, while waiting for the Germans to attack his fort, he steps out of the blockhouse into the forest and immediately proceeds to imagine himself on another adventure which then elicits an enjoyable experience of his unconscious other.

De moment en moment, il s'arrêtait et prêtait l'oreille: pendant des minutes entières, on n'entendait plus rien; le monde semblait se rendormir. . . 'Je suis peut-être de l'autre côté' songea-t-il avec un frisson de pur bien-être; jamais il ne s'était senti avec lui-même dans une telle intimité. Il se mit à siffloter et retira son casque; il le balançait à côté de lui par la jugulaire à la façon d'un panier. . . il aiguissait le sentiment étrange qu'il avait soudain de se suffire, de porter tout avec lui. 'La canne à la main !' (Gracq 211)

Not concerned with capturing his "intimité" or "sentiment étrange" through language in order to neutralize these

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<sup>19</sup>It seems then that in addition to functioning as the avenues through which the protagonist attains an "egoist" self, as we discussed earlier in this chapter, Grange's senses also provide the means by which he experiences his otherness.

feelings, he happily lives through such moments of alterity by way of his imaginative and physical play. His flights of the imagination during these forest outings prove to be a successful process of transmuting his melancholic pain, anxiety, and nausea, that is, his usual reactions to the resurfacings of the unconscious other, into instances of "allégresse," "charme," and "pur bien-être." It seems then that the protagonist's creative, physical play successfully sublimates melancholic suffering, thus effecting the same results that Kristeva solely attributes to religious faith, psychoanalysis or artistic creativity.

In fact, in positing play as the precursor to aesthetic activity, D.W. Winnicott underscores the role of the imagination or of creativity in childhood diversion which, he claims, plays an integral part in the process of self-formation. According to Winnicott, imaginative play takes place neither within the internal subjective world nor within an external shared reality, but rather, within a third, in-between space that Winnicott names the "potential space" of play.

Into this area of play the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses them in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality (Winnicott 51).

First experienced during moments of childhood games, the artist, reader, or viewer continues this integration of internal psychic reality and external objects or phenomena insofar as play, whether aesthetic or physical, Winnicott declares, consistently provides the pleasurable means to subject-construction (Winnicott 54). Given psychoanalysis's notion of the bifurcated self, oscillating between symbolic, narcissistic identity and the semiotic or the unconscious other, enjoyable self-constitution also implies the subject's comfortable recognition and acceptance of its divided psyche. Indeed, the subject at play stimulates and embraces, rather than rejects, his or her sense of inner difference, which, in turn, allows the self to work or rather *play* through the melancholic suffering resulting from his or her inability to define or comprehend psychic alterity.

In fact, in another scene during which Grange, once again, plays in the forest, he recognizes that his creative play leads to a joyful, rather than a melancholic, acceptance of his psychic otherness as he thinks to himself, "*Les Allemands vont venir, mais réellement je n'y suis pour personne. Qui aurait pensé qu'il fallait si peu de chose pour qu'un homme reprenne la mer?*" (Gracq 223) [emphasis added] The protagonist here seems to realize that the

months spent at the Franco-Belgian border waiting for the German invasion was actually a time of self-(re)discovery. Grange now understands that, while living in this geographical and historical ambiguous setting which incited the resurfacings of his unconscious stranger, he gradually learned to cherish and respect this internal "no one" ("personne") that cannot be named. He is surprised that "si peu de chose," in other words, his moments of simple play in the peaceful Ardennes forest during the stressful *drôle de guerre* period, would encourage him to welcome his oceanic "no one" or semiotic "mer" (*mère*). Relieved and elated as he finally acknowledges and enjoys his bifurcated state through play, Grange achieves the cessation of an annoying, habitual background noise in his head which intimates the painful tension resulting from his previous need either to abject the return of the semiotic or to respect its ineffability in melancholic silence. "Il se faisait dans sa tête une rumeur matinale et fraîche que rien n'arrêtait plus: c'était comme si tout à coup un *bruit de fond*, un grincement indiscernable tant il était habituel, avait cessé d'embrouiller sa vie" (223).

Winnicott further explains that in order to enter this "potential space" of play and thus "discover" the ambivalent self, the child or adult must experience a kind of

comforting maternal presence or "holding environment" which is either a real or imagined sense of closeness to and "dependability [on] the mother-figure or environmental elements" (Winnicott 100). In *Un Balcon en forêt*, the dark, mysterious forest becomes the "holding environment" or reassuring space wherein the protagonist freely plays, that is, imagines and creates with confidence and with a consistent sense of "bien-être." In so doing, Grange attains "freedom" which connotes both individuation, as Winnicott contends, and, as I insist, an agreeable sense of psychic movement between the symbolic and semiotic aspects of subjectivity. For instance, while in the maternal forest at night,

Grange marchait dans une sensation de bien-être physique sur laquelle venaient virer des pensées confuses qui n'étaient pas toutes amènes : la nuit le protégeait, lui rendait cette respiration heureuse et cette aisance des bêtes nocturnes pour qui se rouvrent les chemins libres' (Gracq 39-40).

In this wooded "holding environment," the protagonist frequently feels instances of liberation and of rejuvenation that intimate his resurrection, that is, his blissful rediscovery of a self in difference. "Dès que les premiers lacets pénétraient dans les bois, il se sentait léger, rajeuni: de s'enfoncer seulement dans cette forêt autour de lui à perte de vue ravivait un bien-être qui lui dilatait les poumons" (Gracq 50-51). And again,

Au fil de ce layon zigzaguant, le sens de la direction se perdait très vite. Une sensation de bien-être qu'il reconnaissait envahissait l'esprit de Grange ; il se glissait chaque fois dans la nuit de la forêt comme dans une espèce de liberté (Gracq 159).

At one point, the forest even appears to hug the protagonist--"la forêt paraissait se refermer sur lui plus étroitement" (Gracq 212-13)--thereby literally designating its role as maternal "*holding space*." Moreover, given that the forest as "*holding environment*" encourages Grange's sporadic moments of freedom and of rebirth or, in other words, of an enjoyable *sujet-en-procès*, the spatial imagery in this novel, once again, plays a determining role in the protagonist's process of self-formation.

Near the end of the novel, while meandering through the woods, Grange displays another instance of self-awareness and an understanding of the forest's influence over his newfound pleasurable experience vis-à-vis his psychic difference.

De temps en temps, il donnait un coup de pied dans les cailloux du chemin. 'La forêt... pensa-t-il encore. Je suis dans la forêt.' Il n'aurait su en dire plus long; il lui semblait que la pensée se couchait en lui au profit d'une lumière meilleure. Marcher lui suffisait: le monde s'entrouvrait doucement au fil de son chemin comme un gué (211-12).

Grange realizes that it is the maternal, wooded "*holding environment*"--[1]a forêt... pensa-t-il"--that encourages his imaginative play which, in turn, instills a positive,

relaxed reaction to his own obscure, internal "forêt" or unconscious other that, nevertheless, continues to remain unnameable. "Je suis dans la forêt. *Il n'aurait su en dire plus long.*" Indeed, Grange sees that he no longer needs to use "la pensée"--his logos or logical language--as attempts to control the dark or ineffable "forêt" within the self. He also does not need to suffer silently in order to ethically respect this unsayable other given that, through play, he has finally learned how both to cherish and enjoy the resurfacings of otherness. As a result, rather than the incandescence of the "Soleil noir" or "lune morte" which connotes his aphasic, melancholic suffering, "une lumière meilleure" takes over within him, which alludes to his enjoyable creative mode, as he walks and plays through "la forêt," i.e., quietly enjoys the return of his corporeal alterity. Thus, it is the imaginative and playful dimensions of Grange's childlike capers in the woods as well as of his aesthetic activity that change his ethical respect for otherness, from melancholic to pleasurable experiences.

Moreover, these scenes of Grange communing silently with his otherness through his physical senses and affects exemplify the corporeal rebirth that the reader and writer of the revolutionary text achieve, according to both Kristeva and Cixous. It follows then that, like the

mysterious forest, the equally enigmatic revolutionary text represents the "holding space" that incites its implied writer and reader<sup>20</sup> to welcome his or her own difference.

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<sup>20</sup>According to Gerald Prince in *The Dictionary of Narratology*, the *implied author* is the author's second self, mark or persona as reconstructed from the text; the implicit image of an author in the text, taken to be standing behind the scenes and to be responsible for its design and for the values and cultural norms it adheres to (42).

Unlike the narrator, who is "inscribed in [the text] as teller" (43), the *implied author* "does not recount situations or events (but is taken to be accountable for their selection, distribution, and combination)" (42-43). As Wayne Booth, who invented the term *implied author*, further explains,

[a]s he [the author] writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works. To some novelists it has seemed, indeed, that they were discovering or creating themselves as they wrote. As Jessamyn West says, it is something 'only by writing the story that the novelist can discover--not his story--but its writer, the official scribe, so to speak, for that narrative.' Whether we call this implied author an 'official scribe,' or adopt the term recently revived by Kathleen Tillotson--the author's 'second self'--it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author's most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner--and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* 70-71).

Correspondingly, the *implied reader*, as Prince defines it, is

[t]he audience presupposed by a text; a real reader's second self (shaped in accordance with the implied author's values and cultural norms). The implied reader of a text must be distinguished from its real reader [i.e., "the decoder or interpreter (of a written narrative) [who] is not immanent to or deducible from the narrative" (79)] (43).



In fact, the protagonist's quiet, blissful embrace of and play with his otherness as he *steals* through the forest recalls Cixous's image of the writer and reader of difference *flying/thieving* (*voler*) into language that elicits a sense of freedom and intense pleasure or *jouissance*.

### The Writer, Reader, and Text In Difference

As noted earlier, according to Gracq, the ambiguous *drôle de guerre* period in *Un Balcon* corresponds to his natural penchant for setting his fiction in a confusing "climate." "Ce qui s'est trouvé avec *Un Balcon en forêt*, c'est que l'histoire pendant quelques mois a ressemblé à la situation imaginaire dans laquelle j'aime me trouver" ("Sur *Un Balcon en forêt*", 214). Gracq goes on to say in two separate interviews that the spatial imagery in *Un Balcon* not only evokes France's affective oscillations during the *drôle de guerre*, but also enhances his own sense of difference needed to create a text. In an interview with Jean Carrière, Gracq recognizes that the liminal aspect of his spatial settings translates a hidden tension among and within the characters of his novels, which, in turn, serves as the initial impetus to his own creative process.

Confins, lisières, frontières, effectivement, sont des lieux qui m'attirent en imagination: ce sont des lieux

sous tension, et peut-être cette tension est-elle matérialisée, localisée--l'équivalent de ce qu'est la tension latente entre ses personnages pour un romancier psychologue: un stimulant imaginaire initial ("Entretien avec Jean Carrière" 157).

Pinpointing what inspired his creation of *Un Balcon*, Gracq tells Mitrani that it is "la frontière [comme] lieu de tension" and his "trouvaille d'objet"--the blockhouse and its spatial ambiguity--that elicited his own subjective ambivalence essential to the writing of this novel. In his attempt to further elucidate the writing process, Gracq goes on to explain that his creative state (of difference) seems to originate from a "feeling of want" or "lack." He states,

l'origine d'un roman [est] le sentiment d'envie de. C'est plus le sentiment d'un état de manque. C'est ça qui est à l'origine d'un livre, qui annonce un livre. Le sujet se présente comme une devinette tellement qu'il faut combler. C'est comme ça que se déclenche un sujet pour moi. A la fois très flou et très exigeant ("Julian Gracq, la chanson du guetteur"). [emphasis added]

Gracq's description of his initial sense of lack which, subsequently, generates a kind of tension followed by ambivalence all of which is necessary to the creation of a text, also applies to the process of subject-formation as posited by Lacan. According to Lacan, an initial sense of lack-in-being (*manque-à-être*), instigated by chaotic feelings of otherness, incites the subject's anxiety which, during the mirror-stage and thereafter, is assuaged by his or her narcissistic identification with an external image of

self, thereby introducing the subject's psychic split between a stabilizing identity and chaotic otherness. Kristeva further contends that this internal oscillation is heightened within the writer and reader of ambiguous texts. Given the correspondences between self- and text-construction, it follows then that the ambiguity in this novel intimates not only the self's indeterminacy, but also alludes to the implied author's own heightened ambivalence when writing.

Indeed, I contend that *Un Balcon*'s thematization of the protagonist's divided psyche indirectly refers to the implied writer's as well as the implied reader's enhanced state of difference. As with the processes of subject-formation and of writing, reading also entails ambivalence, not only for Kristeva, but for Roland Barthes as well. In *Le Plaisir du texte*, Barthes posits reading as the play between peaceful "plaisir" and angst-causing "jouissance" that emphasizes the oscillation between feelings of self-unity and of self-dispersion in subject construction. "[I]l [le lecteur] jouit de la consistance de son moi (c'est son plaisir) et recherche sa perte (c'est sa jouissance). C'est un sujet deux fois clivé, deux fois pervers" (Barthes 26). Barthes also notes that, whereas the traditional "textes du plaisir," which instantiate "l'unité morale que la société

exige de tout produit humain" (Barthes 52), evoke narcissistic stability in the reader, revolutionary texts instead foster more of the blissful feeling or "plaisir du texte" which thus enhances the reader's ambivalence.

Kristeva additionally elaborates on the reader's response to revolutionary texts by suggesting that a transference takes place between this type of text and the reader which then incites the latter's internal "procès." A text's ambiguity, Kristeva proclaims, exemplifies the process of significance, that is, the semiotic undermining of symbolic or meaningful language in order to recreate symbolic language, with which the reader identifies and, as a result, is him- or herself put "en procès."

Le texte devient l'analyste, et tout lecteur analysand. Mais le fait que la structure et la fonction du langage tiennent lieu de pôle transférentiel dans le texte, permet la mise en procès de toutes les structures langagières, symboliques et sociales (*Révolution* 184-85).

To the extent that it heightens experiences of subjective difference, reading or writing a revolutionary text, as Kristeva and also Cixous see it, implies an always ethical espousal of one's psychic alterity as well as that of the external other. In fact, Cixous's own reading of *Un Balcon*, especially of the scenes in which Grange plays in the dark forest, exemplifies the exhilarating experience of reading the other within. Cixous writes,

Ceci (pages sur lesquelles je vais laisser quelques traces de pas) voudrait être l'écho s'attardant en moi d'*Un Balcon en Forêt*. Je viens de faire le Voyage, à mon tour. Lire Gracq c'est pour moi cela: se laisser conduire, sans demander jusqu'où, vers où, sans but, dans la forêt. Au bord du livre. Le livre Gracq est la barque. Le livre se présente. Je monte. On s'embarque - barque ou train, c'est la coque magique, nef, cygne, wagon, sentier, ce serait ailleurs cheval, chameau - et c'est toujours le rêve qui me porte endormi, voyageur sans identité, voyageur absolu. Maintenant on est porté. Qui? L'Aspirant.<sup>21</sup> L'aspirant au voyage se laisse transporter, passif, loin des villes, loin des usines, et des fumées de guerre, au long de la rivière... Il faut se laisser éloigner, détacher. Où va-t-on? En forêt. En quête. A l'Intérieur Infini ("Le Sens de la forêt" 49).

As Cixous reads this novel's representations of the protagonist living and frolicking deep in the woods, embracing his newfound sense of otherness or "L'Intérieur Infini," she too accepts and plays with her difference so much so that she forgets she is reading a book. Not only does the protagonist's general reticence, that is, his refusal to voice and therefore to negate his experience of alterity while playing in the forest reflect the reader's own ethical respect for otherness, but the novel's ambiguous images and language, or textual play, further stimulate the reader's liberating psychic play with difference. Indeed, the book becomes a "magical" toy that transforms before Cixous's eyes from boat to train, from shell to ship, from

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<sup>21</sup> L'Aspirant here refers to Grange's rank as an officer in the military.

swan to wagon, from path to horse or camel, transporting Cixous on a thrilling internal "Voyage" which seems to take her away from words that carry fixed meanings. Cixous, the reader, becomes then a "voyageur sans identité" insofar as *Un Balcon*'s language lacks the clarity and linearity that typically strengthen the reader's narcissistic identity, as maintained by both Cixous and Kristeva.<sup>22</sup> She further notes that Grange's readings while in the forest, like her own reading of Gracq's novel, symbolize "l'attente sans nom" ("Le Sens de la forêt" 50), which points to the reading of difference as the enduring yet, paradoxically, gratifying experience of the ineffable. In the concluding sentence of her essay, Cixous openly extols this novel's dearth of direct, unambiguous speech (*paroles*) which she credits for encouraging her own imaginative and corporeal adventures into the unconscious other. She writes, "[i]l y a tellement peu de 'paroles' dans *Un Balcon en Forêt*, et tant de phrases longues sentes sollicitant à chaque seconde mes curiosités, qu'en lisant j'ai oublié que c'était un livre..." ("Le Sens de la forêt" 51) To the extent that this "magical" book/toy allows the reader to disregard that it is a text, i.e., symbolic language, reading *Un Balcon* becomes akin to

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<sup>22</sup>See the discussion on writing and reading difference in the section entitled "Writing and Reading the Ambiguous Text: A Means to a Self In Difference" in Chapter 1.

childlike play whereby the subject quietly ventures through the "phrases longues et sentes sollicitant à chaque second [s]es curiosités" as a means to achieve blissful self-discovery.

Moreover, the ambiguous ending of *Un Balcon* continues to encourage the implied reader's play with the text. It remains unclear at the end of the novel as to whether the protagonist dies or simply falls asleep. On the one hand, images of Grange sweating, thirsty, bleeding from his wound as he lies in bed dizzy with random thoughts present a man on the verge of death and/or psychosis. The end of the text presents the protagonist's increasing weakness, due to the wound he suffered during the bombing of the fort, as a loss of control over not just his body but his psyche as well. Attempting to open the door to his lover's room, Grange begins to shake uncontrollably, thereby signaling the return of pronounced feelings of non-integration that disturb his sense of identity. "Ses dents claquaient, la clé tremblait dans sa main, moins de fièvre que d'une hâte délirante; de temps en temps il saisissait son poignet de la main gauche, essayait de calmer les secousses folles" (Gracq 248-49). Once inside Mona's room, he temporarily regains control over his body and its feelings of dispersal. "Son corps se rassemblait peu à peu dans le silence noir--ses forces lui

revenaient" (Gracq 249). Nevertheless, this tenuous state of bodily unity and stability gives way once again as he looks in the mirror; instead of seeing and identifying with his entire corporeal image (his Gestalt), he focuses on parts of his body: "il leva la main . . . le nez contre le miroir . . . ce tête à tête . . . sa cervelle . . . ses limbes vagues . . . une jambe nue" (Gracq 251-252). This description of self through an examination of body parts alludes to increasing corporeal fragmentation, thus announcing impending psychic disintegration. Indeed, the protagonist no longer thinks in a rational, linear manner as his semiotic otherness now seems to undermine his narcissistic self-image. "[S]a pensée dérivait malgré lui, perdait ses ancrs" (Gracq 245); "des pensées flottaient par moments dans sa cervelle, qui lui paraissaient soudain infiniment lointaines" (Gracq 252).

Furthermore, given that Grange identifies with the standing *maison forte* as a way to reinforce his narcissistic self-image, the now destroyed fort, correspondingly, appears to instigate the fragmentation of his *moi*. In *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort*, André Green contends that the narcissist's continuing identification with a destroyed object, which he names *le narcissisme de mort*, brings about a dangerous approximation to psychic disintegration. "Les



rapports réflexifs qui s'instaurent entre l'organisation narcissique du Moi et l'objet font bien comprendre que la destruction de l'objet peut prendre la forme réfléchie de l'auto-destruction" (Green 53). In identifying with the object's lost state or disappearance, the narcissist decreases his or her internal ambivalence thus nearing psychic death: "[c]'est alors la recherche active non de l'unité, mais du néant; c'est-à-dire d'un abaissement des tensions au niveau zéro, qui est l'approximation de la mort psychique" (Green 22). Whereas before, the protagonist identified with the existing fort to attain a sense of wholeness or "oneness," he now identifies with the fort's disappearance, that is, with its void or "zeroness," thus suggesting his psychic homeostasis. Grange's apparent mimicry of death in the final scene, in effect, further intimates his (psychic) death. "Il resta un moment encore les yeux grands ouverts dans le noir vers le plafond, tout à fait immobile . . . Puis il tira la couverture sur sa tête et s'endormit" (Gracq 253). Grange's total immobility, his blank stare into darkness, and the cover over his head create the unmistakable image of a body numbed into psychic inertia which is typical of the melancholic or negative narcissist who oftentimes "se réfugie jusqu'à l'inaction,

jusqu'à faire le mort ou jusqu'à la mort elle-même"

(Kristeva, *Soleil noir* 20).

Yet, on the other hand, in spite of his seeming gradual fall into homeostasis, the setting in the last scene of the novel appears to negate the protagonist's (psychic) death. Indeed, the space wherein the protagonist plays his death is his lover's room whose womb imagery suggests, on the contrary, Grange's sense of life or imminent rebirth, that is, his illusory intrauterine reunification with the pre-Oedipal (m)other as exemplified by his feelings while lying in Mona's bed: "il se sentait blotti là comme dans un ventre" (Gracq 249). The many references to water, in addition, intimate Grange's sense of floating in utero. "Il regardait autour de lui . . . flotter l'eau lourde de la pièce claquemurée" (Gracq 250); "[L]e silence se referma comme une eau tranquille" (Gracq 252). One of the last images even alludes to the sound of circulating blood as if Grange were a fetus listening to the mother's circulation. "La vie retombait à ce silence douceâtre de prairie d'asphodèles, plein du léger froissement du sang contre l'oreille" (Gracq 252-53). Moreover, we must not ignore that the last phrase of the novel is, in fact, "[il] s'endormit" and not "il est mort."

Thus, the contradictory imagery in this final scene, which entails Grange's apparent (psychic) death in a room that, paradoxically, intensifies his feelings of life, not only suggests the deferral of the protagonist's demise, but also thwarts the text's closure. Earlier in the text, the novel twice prefigures the postponement both of Grange's (psychic) death and of the text's conclusion as it compares the protagonist's sense of self to a book. The narrator of *Un Balcon*, for instance, likens the protagonist's decreasing lucidity, after he has been wounded, to the implied writer's or reader's act of reaching the end of a book. The image used to illustrate the protagonist's growing state of psychic inertia or of sleepiness is that of the turning of a page, i.e. the coming to the close of a book.

Il n'éprouvait qu'un sentiment de vide dans la tête et de fraîcheur aux tempes, qui était le bord presque attrayant de l'évanouissement, et -- déjà au delà -- une détente, un allègement, qui était le sentiment de la page tournée et de la journée finie (Gracq 237).

However, the novel continues on for another sixteen pages, thereby underscoring the postponement of the protagonist's homeostasis as well as the text's deferral of closure. Later on, the narrator compares Grange's final entrance into Mona's room to the end of an "epilogue", that is, a conclusion of a "concluding part of a literary work" (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 837).

-- Quelle histoire! pensa-t-il. Il se sentait encore un peu hébété, mais il essayait de rassembler ses idées; il comprenait que la porte claquée sur lui avait tiré un trait, s'était refermée sur un épilogue: sa courte aventure de guerre avait pris fin (Gracq 249).

Nevertheless, Grange's life along with the novel's still persist. Thus, the announcement of the protagonist's demise and of the book's concluding pages before the book actually ends again highlights the self's and the text's delay of closure. It seems then that the metaphorical representations of self as the endings of texts are strategically placed in this novel so as to suggest the ongoing state of deferral and of indecision characteristic of both the ambivalent self (e.g., Grange) and the ambiguous text (e.g., *Un Balcon*).

Besides underscoring the similar lack of closure in both the ambivalent self and text in difference, these two comparisons also become *mises-en-abymes* for the implied reader of this novel insofar as Grange's ongoing subjective ambivalence also intimates the implied reader's state when reaching this novel's open ending. Indeed, this novel's ambiguity, especially at the end, may incite the reader--as exemplified by Cixous's reading of *Un Balcon*--to play with the text, by pluralizing meanings, rather than trying to grasp an overriding message.

By presenting the protagonist, directly, and both implied writer and reader, indirectly, as continuous *sujets-en-procès* or subjects in difference while, at the same time, disrupting the closure and meaning of the text, *Un Balcon* clearly displays its ethical dimension as proposed by Kristeva. In *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Kristeva defines the ethical text or work of art as a practice that at once posits and subverts symbolic, narcissistic fixations of subjectivity as well as of signification.

Nous entendrons par *éthique* la négativation du narcissisme dans une pratique; autrement dit, est éthique une pratique qui dissout les fixations narcissiques (étroitement subjectales) auxquelles succombe le procès signifiant dans son effectuation socio-symbolique. La pratique telle que nous l'avons définie posant-dissolvant le sens et l'unité du sujet, recouvre ce que nous venons de dire de l'éthique. On comprend alors que le texte qui, dans sa disposition signifiante et dans sa signification, est une pratique assurant toute positivité pour la négativer et pour faire ainsi apparaître le procès qui la sous-tend, est précisément ce qui réalise l'exigence éthique (203).

It appears then that Gracq's novel exemplifies "la fonction éthique du texte, ou plus généralement, de l'art"

(*Révolution* 203) insofar as this text simultaneously presents and transgresses the Symbolic law of stability and unity within both the self and textual meaning. Thus, instead of directly stating an ethical message, Gracq's text in difference "practices" it. "L'éthique ne s'énonce pas, elle se pratique à perte: le texte est un des exemples les

plus accomplis d'une telle pratique" (Kristeva, *Révolution* 204). In other words, *Un Balcon* does not emit "un message considéré comme 'positif'" whose "énonciation univoque" brings about "une suppression de la fonction éthique telle que nous l'entendons" (*Révolution* 203). Such a text would require that the writer take the position of master, an authoritative, unified voice who transmits a single meaning or message. Gracq, on the contrary, does not attempt to communicate a particular "moral" or "positive" message in *Un Balcon*. In fact, in his interview with Carrière, Gracq admits to his "aversion" to deliberate "messages" in literature which explains the pervasive textual ambiguity and hence obvious absence of a "positive" message in *Un Balcon en forêt* that subsequently elicits the reader's non-stop play with both textual and psychic otherness.

CHAPTER 3  
PSYCHIC, SEXUAL, AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE IN TAHAR BEN  
JELLOUN'S *LA NUIT SACRÉE*

Moroccan poet and novelist, Tahar Ben Jelloun often writes about the plight of Arab women<sup>1</sup> in his novels. In an interview, Ben Jelloun recognizes that the majority of his narrative fiction condemn women's second-class status in Arabic cultures. "J'ai l'impression que le sujet est toujours la femme. J'ai commencé par dénoncer la manière dont elle est exploitée, humiliée, jusque dans *L'Enfant de sable* et *La Nuit sacrée* où c'était très visible" ("Tahar Ben Jelloun, Deux cultures, une littérature" 111). Indeed, these two novels were inspired by a "fait divers," published in a Moroccan newspaper, about a man with several daughters

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<sup>1</sup>While some may prefer to employ the adjective *Arabic* rather than *Arab* when referring to a person of Arab descent, I chose to use the adjective *Arab* in light of *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary's* definitions for *Arab* and *Arabic*. According to the *OED*, *Arab* as an adjective means "[o]f or pertaining to Arabia or the Arabs; Arabian" (105). The *OED's* definitions and example uses of *Arabic* suggest that *Arabic* is not usually employed when describing people. Indeed, *Arabic* is defined as that which is "[o]f the Arabs; of or pertaining to the language and literature of the Arabs" (*OED* 106).

and no male heir who, for twenty years, disguised his last daughter as his male son.

Although prompted by the same source, *L'Enfant de sable* (1985) and *La Nuit sacrée* (1987) present different narrative approaches. Whereas, in *L'Enfant de sable*, many narrators provide competing stories that recount the life of the young woman living as a man, in *La Nuit sacrée*, the infamous woman-man narrates her own story in her old age. *La Nuit sacrée*, for which Ben Jelloun won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1987, introduces an elderly narrator's fragmented and ambiguous tale of her melancholy existence after her father's death and during her new life as a woman. Indeed, even after she ceases to disguise herself as male, the narrator-protagonist, whose name is Zahra, continues to identify with both genders which, in turn, instigates her distressing sense of ambivalence or of a self in difference.

Given the narrator's highly self-conscious narration of her psychic state in the past, which is analogous to the outcome of analysis, *La Nuit sacrée* easily lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading. The allusions to subjectivity throughout the novel suggest that the author is well-versed in psychoanalytic theory, as most writers of his generation who, like Tahar Ben Jelloun, lived and wrote in France during the sixties and seventies. However, the text's



psychoanalytic perspective also reflects a present-day phenomenon in Moroccan literature--the writing of the self or "moi." According to Marc Gontard, Moroccan writers writing in French have recently changed from an "écriture de la violence" (Gontard 7), which reflected the search for a new Moroccan collective identity during the 1970s, to a writing of the individual's divided and therefore ambivalent identity in a multilingual and multicultural nation.

Après avoir cherché à s'intégrer dans une identité collective renaissante, le Moi tente aujourd'hui de découvrir ses propres repères, dans un contexte marqué par un plurilinguisme générateur de concurrence culturelle. . . [O]ù l'ouverture et le métissage sont vécus, tantôt comme une menace, le Moi qui fait retour à lui-même se trouve confronté à sa propre opacité de sorte que l'écriture, au Maroc, ces dernières années, me semble travaillée par cette figure fondamentale d'un Moi étrange, ambivalent, pluriel, et bien souvent indéchiffrable (Gontard 8).

In keeping with this contemporary frame in Moroccan French literature, Ben Jelloun's novel presents a fictitious, Moroccan woman's self-conscious depiction of her coming to terms with her "ambivalent, plural, and indecipherable *Moi étrange*." Ben Jelloun evidently points to the inexplicable complexities of subject-formation insofar as he chooses a unique protagonist who oscillates between male and female identities.

The first section of this chapter considers the presentation of the protagonist's as well as the narrator's

persistent melancholia. The older narrator describes how, as a younger woman, to whom I refer as "Zahra, the protagonist," she tended to suffer silently her feelings of internal ambivalence or her *Moi étrange*. Zahra's autobiography, however, traces the means by which she comes to cherish and to enjoy her self in difference, thereby temporarily sublimating her deep depression. Using Kristeva's, Levinas's, and Cixous's theories of an ethics of alterity, I examine, in the second, third and fourth sections of this chapter, how Ben Jelloun's novel thematizes the process of self-discovery in which the narrator-protagonist's appreciation for internal otherness leads to her respect for the external other's difference, especially that of oppressed Arab women. I contend that *La Nuit sacrée* highlights passionate love, reading, dreaming, writing and oral narration as practices that bring about an ethics of difference.

To the extent that it presents her self in difference, Zahra's autobiography is, correspondingly, a text in difference. Indeed, *La Nuit*'s complex narrative complements its tale of psychic/sexual ambivalence. The narrative alternates between, as Gerard Genette calls them, the *extradiégétique*, *diégétique*, and *metadiégétique* levels. For

example, the moments when Zahra, as the implied author,<sup>2</sup> speaks directly to the implied reader without any other mediation qualify as the *extradiegetic* instances of the text, as defined by Genette (Genette 228-39). Contrariwise, the scenes in which Zahra comes to Marrakesh, watches the oral performers and salesmen, and starts to tell her story represent the *diegetic* level of the narrative. The *diegetic* is "[t]he level at which an existent, event, or act of recounting is situated with regard to a given diegesis" (Prince 20).<sup>3</sup> The diegesis, in turn, is "[t]he (fictional) world in which the situations and events narrated occur" (Prince 20). Zahra's adventures as a young woman then take place at the *metadiegetic* level which "when [the text's] metadiegetic level is forgotten . . . it is said to be a pseudo-diegetic narrative" (Prince 50). In this chapter, I study how such textual complexity in Ben Jelloun's novel further displays an ethics of otherness.

In addition to underscoring psychic, sexual, and textual difference, *La Nuit* also celebrates cultural difference. Like several other North African poets and

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<sup>2</sup>See note 20 in Chapter 2 for definitions of *implied author* and *reader*.

<sup>3</sup>I draw from Genette's *Figures III* as well as from Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* which offers clear and concise definitions of Genette's narrative terms.

novelists who write in French, Ben Jelloun introduces his Moroccan culture into the French novel, thereby creating what many find to be "ce qu'il y a de plus vivant dans la littérature française de nos jours" (Elbaz 12). At the end of this chapter, I analyze some points of intersection in the novel between instances of French and North African cultures.

Melancholia or the Potentially Ethical Entombment of  
Alterity

Zahra's life as a young man was never cheerful or carefree. Years later, as an older woman, she acknowledges her early despondency. "Et moi j'étais plutôt triste. . . . Je riais rarement et je n'étais jamais drôle" (35). Her miserable life disguised as a man eventually drove her away from her family in search of happiness and a new identity as a female. As the narrator states, "[C]ette année-là je décidai de chasser de mon esprit tout ce que me torturait et versait de l'encre noire dans mes pensées" (35). Despite her decision to find pleasure as a woman, Zahra continues to endure the "black ink" or black bile<sup>4</sup> of her thoughts; that is, she suffers deep depression or melancholia to which she often alludes with such poetic images throughout her

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<sup>4</sup>The image of black bile was often linked to melancholia during the Middle Ages. See Wolf Lepenies's *Melancholia and Society*.

narration. For example, during one of her dreams or hallucinatory sequences shortly after she flees her family, Zahra, the protagonist, imagines a prince or a Cheikh who addresses her in the following manner: "Ô soleil sur lune. Lune des lunes, étoile pleine de nuit et de lumière" (39). Her self-depiction through such a string of lunar metaphors brings to mind Nerval's poetic image of the *soleil noir* which, as Kristeva posits, is the quintessential symbol for melancholia.<sup>5</sup>

As her increased poetic allusions to melancholia suggest, Zahra's sadness steadily worsens throughout the novel. She eventually reaches a state of total indifference towards life, which, as we have seen, is typical of many melancholics.<sup>6</sup> Conscious of her growing indifference and its possible dangerous consequences, the young protagonist admits "je suis menacée par l'indifférence, ce qu'on appelle le désert des émotions. Si je ne ressens plus rien, je me fanerai et je disparaîtrai" (105). Such images of aridity

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<sup>5</sup>Zahra's lunar metaphors also allude to her sense of imminent lunacy which, as we will later see, her melancholia instigates.

<sup>6</sup>During the Middle Ages, the Christian Church began to refer to melancholia as *acedia*, thereby highlighting sloth and indifference as the specific vices of melancholia. As Stanley W. Jackson explains, [t]he Latin *acedia* was the transliteration of the Greek [term] meaning heedlessness, sluggishness, torpor, literally non-caring-state" (65).

and of fading flowers indeed forebode her complete desensitization. In fact, Zahra eventually kills her uncle while in a trance-like state. As the older narrator recounts, the murder is a calm, almost mechanical act, which is underscored by a series of relatively short declarative sentences.

Je lui demandai [à mon oncle] de m'attendre le temps d'aller chercher mes affaires pour le suivre. Je montai dans la chambre du Consul . . . J'allai directement au tiroir du bas. Je chargeais le revolver et descendis sans me presser. Arrivée à un mètre de l'oncle, je tirai tout le chargeur dans le ventre (140).

Furthermore, near the end of the narrative, the protagonist enters a complete state of indifference which intimates the possibility of her suicide.<sup>7</sup> As the self-cognizant narrator explains,

Mon regard n'avait plus d'harmonie. Il se posait par hasard. Il était devenu indifférent. Il m'arrivait d'avoir le sentiment d'inutilité. . . . [M]es sentiments étaient blancs, de cette blancheur qui aboutit au néant et à la mort lente. Mes émotions s'étaient diluées dans un lac d'eau stagnante; mon corps s'était arrêté dans son évolution; il ne muait plus, il s'éteignait pour ne plus bouger et ne plus rien ressentir; ni un corps de femme plein et avide, ni

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<sup>7</sup>According to Kristeva, just as words become meaningless, acts, including murder and suicide, also lack meaning for the indifferent melancholic.

Par ailleurs, l'activité défensive fébrile qui voile la tristesse inconsolable de tant de déprimés, avant et y compris le meurtre ou le suicide, est une projection des résidus de la symbolisation: délestés de leur sens par le déni, ses actes sont traités comme des quasi-objets expulsés au dehors ou bien retournés sur soi dans la plus grande indifférence d'un sujet anesthésié lui-même par le déni (*Soleil noir* 63).

un corps d'homme serein et fort; j'étais entre les deux, c'est-à-dire en enfer" (177-78).

Much like the white static of a television screen devoid of images, Zahra's internal "whiteness" intimates her complete dearth of emotions. Her "indifferent look," her "sense of uselessness," and the transformation of her feelings into a still pond, all suggest the protagonist's stifled emotions and her concomitant experience of "nothingness" or, as André Green puts it, of "zeroness," of a "narcissisme de mort." Green argues that feelings of an inner "néant" are characteristic of the negative narcissist, i.e. the melancholic, as he or she slowly unites with the ineffability or nothingness of death. Consequently, Zahra's "corps [qui] s'était arrêté dans son évolution" no longer changes ("mue") or vacillates between feelings of unconscious otherness and of conscious stability, between the other and the same. Indeed, her inability to identify with either gender instigates Zahra's painful, "hellish" experience of (sexual) indifference, that is, of an inner "néant" or, as I quoted earlier, of "le désert des émotions" (105). Such a sense of (sexual) indifference thus points to Zahra's dangerous loss of a self in difference or, as both

Cixous and Kristeva metaphorically refer to it, of a "bisexual self."<sup>8</sup>

It appears then that Ben Jelloun's novel presents a pseudo-diegetic protagonist plunged into a state of acute sadness that, moreover, persists into her old age. Indeed, her continuing state of melancholia becomes evident at the diegetic level given that the narrator, who is the protagonist in the late stages of her life, still speaks in a melancholic tone. For example, when Zahra, as narrator, first addresses her audience or narratees<sup>9</sup> gathered around her at the village circle, she refers to herself as one of the many "âmes déchues" (19) whose life she captures with a list of dreary events, places, people and things. "Des voyages, des routes, des cieus sans étoiles, des rivières en crue, des paquets de sable, des rencontres inutiles, des maisons froides, des visages humides, une longue marche..." (19)

Furthermore, all of the other characters in the narrative seem to be plagued with melancholia, as is evidenced in the father's complete indifference towards life (28) as well as in the mother's and sisters's bleak

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<sup>8</sup>See Chapter One, pages 21 to 23, for an analysis of Kristeva's and Cixous's depictions of a split subject as a "bisexual" self.

<sup>9</sup>According to Prince, the narratee is "the audience of the narrator and is inscribed as such in the text" (43).



existences. While confessing his sins to Zahra at his death bed, Zahra's father captures the pitiful lives led by his wife and daughters condemned to live as women in a patriarchal household and thus to obey a distant and even, at times, a cruel husband and father. Employing the imperfect tense and present participles, he underscores the unremitting aspect of his wife's sorrow.

[L]es larmes coulaient sur ses joues sans que son visage ait la moindre expression--donc les larmes silencieuses, et puis ce visage toujours le même, neutre, plat, une tête couverte d'un fichu, et puis cette lenteur qu'elle avait en marchant, en mangeant; jamais un rire ou un sourire. Et puis tes soeurs, elles lui ressemblaient toutes (27).

Even the Assise, the woman who houses Zahra after she leaves her family, suffers from "un immense désespoir, une tristesse et une impuissance infinies menant vers les ténèbres" (100). This pervasive sadness undoubtedly helps heighten not only the pseudo-diegetic Zahra's melancholia but the melancholic atmosphere of Zahra's story at the diegetic and extradiegetic levels as well.

However, it is the Consul's melancholia that helps highlight the complexity and positive potential of the narrator-protagonist's deep depression. Indeed, the Consul, the Assise's blind brother, is the only other character who experiences his melancholia much like Zahra in that both appear to respect its source or "secret." The Consul, at first, simply identifies with Zahra's deep depression--"nous

devons probablement avoir, cachée en nous, une même blessure . . . quelque chose de brisé qui nous rapproche" (85).

Later, he recognizes that her total indifference towards life, that is, her suicidal tendencies, which are akin to his own feelings, stem from a shared "secret." Speaking with Zahra, he confides,

À n'importe quel moment nous pouvons quitter ce monde, sans regret, sans drame. J'ai passé toute ma vie à me faire à l'idée de ce départ volontaire. Ma mort, je la porte en moi, à la boutonnière. . . . Je dis 'nous' parce que nous sommes semblables, et qu'un pacte scellé par le secret nous unit" (135) [emphasis added].

But what exactly is this "secret" that inflicts both Zahra and the Consul with melancholia and concomitant suicidal thoughts? The narrator, it seems, alludes to the "secret" a few times in her narrative such as when she describes her prison cell. Zahra realizes that her life in jail matched her already melancholic disposition or psychological self-imprisonment.

La prison est un lieu où on simule la vie. C'est une absence. Elle a la couleur de l'absence, la couleur d'une longue journée sans lumière. C'est un drap, un linceul étroit, un visage brûlé, déserté par la vie. Ma cellule était étroite et j'en étais ravie. Je vous disais qu'elle préfigurait la tombe; je considérais ce séjour comme faisant partie des préparatifs au grand départ. L'humidité des murs ne m'atteignait pas. J'étais contente d'avoir enfin un territoire à l'échelle de mon corps (143).

Her portrayal of life in prison as an "absence," as if she were already in a "tomb," recalls the Kristevan

melancholic's tendency to become a "mort vivant," to play dead.<sup>10</sup> According to Kristeva, such a melancholic death drive derives from a "jubilant" sense of reunification with the (m)other (*Soleil noir* 30). In fact, similar to the underground fort in Julien Gracq's *Un Balcon en forêt* which intimates not only a tomb but a womb as well, Zahra's crypt-like prison cell also paradoxically incites her gratifying sense of being *in utero*. Indeed, the protagonist feels comfortably confined within this "narrow" cell with "humid walls." She even conveys her delight within this womb-tomb, that is, her death wish when declaring, "enfin un territoire à l'échelle de mon corps." However, in addition to Zahra's reference in the above quote to a womb-tomb, her many depictions of her self with images of crypts--"[j]'avais l'impression que nous nous étions volontairement enfermés dans une crypte" (128)--or of other tombs --"[j]e me retrouvais encore dans le lieu maudit où mon père était enterré" (177)--suggest another experience typical of melancholics, that of having the ineffable other entombed within. In *Soleil noir*, Kristeva writes, "Mais [la Chose], il [le dépressif] ne la traduira pas pour ne pas la trahir:

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<sup>10</sup>As previously quoted in Chapter Two, Kristeva writes, "le sujet [mélancolique] se réfugie jusqu'à l'inaction, jusqu'à faire le mort" (*Soleil noir* 20).

elle restera emmurée dans la 'crypte' de l'affect indicible, captée analement, sans issue" (64-5).

In the beginning of the novel, a fortune-teller in the town circle notices how the protagonist's disconcerting silence ironically "speaks" of an ineffable "secret" within her, when he proclaims, "Votre silence me dit... Qu'est-ce qu'il me dit? Ah! Que vous serrez contre votre coeur un secret et qu'il ne faut pas vous importuner davantage. Vous êtes de la race des gens d'honneur. Avec vous pas de palabres" (14) [emphasis added]. Thus, Zahra's use of metaphorical tombs to describe herself, coupled with her growing reticence, point to her sense of an encrypted alterity within as well as to her refusal to betray this strange, indescribable otherness or "secret" with language. Indeed, by remaining silent vis-à-vis her internal other, the narrator-protagonist is unable to neutralize difference into a comforting linguistic mastery or comprehension as is done in the process of mourning. As a result, Zahra cannot achieve a narcissistic feeling of "increased being;"<sup>11</sup> hence

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<sup>11</sup>Narcissistic, here, refers to the process of incorporating otherness into sameness to achieve stability and "increased being," as Marshall W. Alcorn describes it in *Narcissism and the Literary Libido*. I discuss this perception of narcissism in Chapter 1, in the two sections entitled "Limited Narcissism and the Ethical Self" and "Melancholia, Aesthetic Play and the Ethical Self/Text."

her melancholic pain.<sup>12</sup> It follows then that the mysterious "Thing" behind her melancholia, that is, the disquieting ineffable otherness at the heart of her depression and the Consul's, remains a "secret."

Decades later, the more self-aware narrator directly refers to the futility of trying to grasp her otherness and, subsequently, her melancholia with words. Towards the end of her narration, she claims, "la souffrance, celle qui fait des trous dans la tête et dans le coeur, celle-là, on ne peut la dire, ni la montrer. Elle est intérieure, enfermée, invisible" (184). It seems then that Zahra's inability or unwillingness to articulate her otherness intimates a nascent passive reverence for the internal other insofar as she does not try to absorb it "in the immanence of linguistic totality" (Ziarek, "Kristeva and Levinas" 72). The protagonist-narrator's abstention from naming her sense of otherness in *La Nuit* thus predisposes her to become open to difference, an incipient ethical stance. Nevertheless, Zahra's continued silences, that is, her melancholic refusal

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<sup>12</sup>See my comparison of mourning and melancholia in Chapter One, in the section entitled "Melancholia, Aesthetic Play and the Ethical Self/Text."

to capture otherness through symbolic,<sup>13</sup> meaningful language threaten her with psychosis.

Thus, Zahra's new-found freedom to live as a woman does not automatically liberate her from her depression. She must actively search for the means that allow her to enjoy rather than passively suffer through her ineffable, ambivalent or "other bisexual" self. The next three sections in this chapter examine the various events that foster Zahra's appreciation of otherness.

#### Love as a Means to Limited Narcissism

Zahra, the character, appears to be riddled with guilt as she repeatedly utters self-revilings that culminate in expectations of punishment. For instance, she calls herself a "monstre" (53) and indirectly reproaches herself for having destroyed her family when she hallucinates others saying "quelque chose en toi provoque la destruction. Je ne sais pas quoi. Je le sens. Un malheur doit t'habiter. A ton insu. Il se propage et se nourrit de la défaite des autres" (49). She also imagines her sisters accusing her, as they protest, "...menteuse, voleuse; tu nous as tout

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<sup>13</sup>In order to maintain the distinction between the Kristevan and the Lacanian definitions of this term, I use "symbolic" when referring to Kristeva's idea and "Symbolic" to indicate Lacan's notion. See Chapter One for a discussion on these two different terms.

pris...espèce de salaud, un salaud qui nous massacrait..." (156). Zahra, it seems, perceives herself as doomed to cause problems for others. Contemplating her role in the Consul's and the Assise's home, the narrator notes, "[j]e devais entrer dans cette maison et ma nature devait y provoquer le trouble" (107). Moreover, the protagonist always expects to be punished sometime in the future, "Je lui dis qu'un jour ou l'autre on me retrouverait et qu'on me châtierait. Je l'attendais ce jour avec sérénité" (133).

Her self-accusations, it appears, usually stem from Zahra's new-found guilt for her previous life and attitudes as a man. After leaving her family, the protagonist starts to realize that she was cruel to her mother and her sisters. Born into an Arab, Muslim family of daughters, in which Zahra was considered to be the sole male son, Ahmed, Zahra-Ahmed lived a life of privilege typically granted to the male heir in Arab families. Indeed, Zahra-Ahmed was "un enfant sans cette enfance misérable" (27), that is, without the painful neglect undergone by the female children in the family who were ignored by all, but especially by the father. Zahra-Ahmed's family revered her/him as the "child of light," "dans [s]on habit de lumière, un petit prince" (27), "une statue, un monument à la lumière, ramenant l'honneur et la fierté dans la maison" (158). Taking advantage of her special social status as male, Zahra-Ahmed

mistreated and ignored the female members of her family. For example, Zahra, as narrator, recalls her total absence of feeling for her mother to the extent that the mother became an almost non-entity in Zahra-Ahmed's eyes.

Je ne peux pas dire que je l'aimais. Quand elle ne suscitait pas en moi de la pitié--ce sentiment de honte amère ou de colère certes silencieuse--, elle ne comptait pas. Je ne la voyais pas et j'oubliais qu'elle était ma mère. Il m'arrivait de la confondre avec Malika, la vieille servante, ou avec le fantôme d'une mendiante folle qui venait de temps en temps se réfugier chez nous, dans le vestibule, quand les enfants la pourchassaient en lui lançant des pierres et des insultes. Quand je rentrais le soir j'enjambais un corps emmitouflé dans une couverture de l'armée. Je ne cherchais pas à savoir si c'était la folle ou ma mère expulsée de son propre foyer. Même si j'étais bouleversée, je ne le montrais pas. Je fermais les yeux. Pour ne pas voir. Pour ne pas entendre. Et surtout pour ne pas avoir à parler (53).

For Zahra-Ahmed, her mother was insignificant--"elle ne comptait pas"--and even invisible to the extent that Zahra-Ahmed "ne la voyai[t] pas." Zahra-Ahmed's lack of love and her complete disregard for her mother--"j'oubliais qu'elle était ma mère"-- thus evidence her learned male insensitivity towards women. In fact, by confusing her mother with "Malika, la vieille servante," and with "une mendiante folle," a social outcast who correspondingly sleeps, at times, in the house's vestibule, Zahra-Ahmed illustrates the male propensity to marginalize all females as inconsequential and/or "folles." Indeed, while playing the male role, Zahra-Ahmed paid no attention or rather "shut



her eyes to" not just her mother and sisters but to the female other in general.

Thus, after having recognized Zahra-Ahmed as "l'enfant de lumière" and, in so doing, supported her narcissistic sense of a "greater being," the mother disappeared for Zahra-Ahmed. According to Cixous, in the traditional, patriarchal, Hegelian scheme of recognition between self and other, "il n'y pas de place pour l'autre, pour un autre égal, pour une femme entière et vivante. Il faut qu'elle le reconnaisse et en le reconnaissant, dans le temps de l'accomplissement, qu'elle *disparaisse*, en lui laissant le bénéfice d'un gain - ou d'une victoire imaginaire" (*La Jeune née* 145-46) [emphasis added]. It appears then that Zahra-Ahmed's indifference towards the female members of her family displays the patriarchal narcissistic practice of, as Cixous names it, "l'Empire du Propre" at its most harmful point, that in which a female, mimicking the role of male, refuses to recognize fellow female others' alterity.

Yet, while Zahra-Ahmed ignored her mother's and sisters' difference, she herself also became the victim of "l'Empire du Propre;" that is, the protagonist was the unrecognized other vis-à-vis her father. Insofar as she was constrained to live, literally, as male and thus to disregard her biological sex, Zahra painfully served as the

narcissistic support for her father's aggrandizement. In other words, the father appropriated her female difference into male sameness by having her play the role of his son, thereby exemplifying the self-enhancing Hegelian dialectic which entails, as Cixous puts it, "la sortie du sujet dans l'autre pour revenir à lui-même" (*La Jeune née* 144). Forced by the father to repress her own alterity, the protagonist, as a result, refused to recognize other females' difference. Not surprisingly, this novel traces Zahra's difficult search both for a comfortable sense of inner difference as well as for an appreciation of the external other's alterity, once she is, as she describes it, "affranchi[e] comme on faisait autrefois avec les esclaves" by her father (i.e., her master). Indeed, her story and ensuing negative self-perception as "cette carcasse où tout tombait en ruine" (174) offers an extreme example and testimony of the agony suffered by women in a society that upholds the male narcissistic usurpation of female otherness.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>My use of *usurpation* again relates to the idea of a narcissistic incorporation of difference into sameness that I examine in the third section of Chapter 1. In this section, I point out that Cixous, Kristeva, and Levinas, each in their own distinct way, criticize society's tendency to usurp otherness into sameness. Cixous, moreover, focuses on how male sameness, which is usually perceived as the universal, neutralizes female difference.

Moreover, Zahra's clitoridectomy towards the end of the novel, performed by her sisters as an act of revenge against Zahra, illustrates, once again, the severe violence and inhumanity against women which such a male dominated society may instigate, even in women themselves. Indeed, her sisters become "une secte des soeurs musulmanes, fanatiques et brutales" (157) and, as a result, act according to their sect's law which condones clitoridectomy, that is, the radical neutralization of female otherness (or desire). Zahra's older sister discloses the fact that they were granted the permission to circumcise her by the patriarchal heads of their sect, when she declares, "Tu n'as jamais été notre frère et tu ne seras jamais notre soeur. Nous t'avons exclue de la famille en présence d'hommes de religion et de temoins de bonne foi et de haute vertu" (158). Thus, just as Zahra, when living in the guise of Ahmed, ignored her sisters' difference, the sisters, in turn, try to physically erase Zahra's female alterity. All of these women, at one time or another, unknowingly preserve patriarchal society's devalorization of their own female otherness and the concomitant valorization of male sameness.

No longer maintaining an "Empire of the Same," Zahra begins to foster a limited narcissism that allows for her sense of otherness to flourish, after she leaves her family. At this time, the protagonist renounces, as she admits, her

narcissistic possession of others, especially of her family, as if they were her property. "[O]n a inculqué à l'homme le besoin de posséder: une maison, des parents, des enfants, des pierres, des titres de propriété, de l'argent, d'or, des gens... Moi, je suis en train d'apprendre à ne rien posséder" (84). Yet, it is only when she falls in love with the Consul and engages in an impassioned relationship with him that Zahra finally learns to embrace her internal difference as well as the Consul's otherness. Following their first night of sensuous, physical love, the protagonist, while sitting next to the Consul, welcomes an unnameable feeling of strangeness mixed with happiness and inner peace. As the narrator states,

Il y a des moments intenses où seule une présence suffit et on ne sait pas pourquoi quelque chose de puissant se produit et parfois de déterminant se produit. On ne peut le nommer. Seule l'émotion le trahit pour des raisons obscures et on s'en trouve chargé et heureux comme un enfant qu'une joie transporte dans un monde merveilleux. Pour ma part je ne pensais pas un jour arriver à cet état où le corps et les sentiments flottaient et m'emportaient vers des cimes d'un air pur. Un vent descendu d'une haute montagne passait sur mes pensées. Plus rien n'était confus. J'étais en paix avec moi-même et cela je ne l'avais peut-être jamais connu (128).

Reminiscent of Gracq's protagonist in *Un Balcon en forêt*, Zahra here likens the exhilaration of her new-found internal difference with childhood feelings experienced during imaginative play into "un monde merveilleux." The

protagonist's corporeal and emotional sense of floating upwards in the air indeed reveals a joyous moment of psychic change or difference.

The narrator later further explains that it was, in particular, her blind lover's caress of her body that incited her to discover her sense of difference and to remain open to it, thereafter.

J'étais heureuse que le premier homme qui aima mon corps fût un aveugle, un homme qui avait les yeux au bout des doigts et dont les caresses lentes et douces recomposaient mon image. Ma victoire je la tenais là; je la devais au Consul dont la grâce s'exprimait principalement par le toucher. Il redonna à chacun de mes sens sa vitalité qui était endormie ou entravée (136).

Given the Consul's lack of sight, there is an obvious valorization of touch in their relationship which, as Levinas contends, is the best means to approach the other with reverence.

La caresse est un mode d'être du sujet, où le sujet dans le contact d'un autre va au delà de ce contact. . . . Cette recherche de la caresse en constitue l'essence par le fait que la caresse ne sait pas ce qu'elle cherche. Ce 'ne pas savoir', ce désordonné fondamental en est l'essentiel. Elle est comme un jeu avec quelque chose qui se dérobe, et un jeu absolument sans projet ni plan, non pas avec ce qui peut devenir nôtre et nous, mais quelque chose d'autre, toujours autre, toujours inaccessible, toujours à venir (*Le Temps et l'autre* 82).

It follows then that, as the Consul "passait de longs moments à dévisager tout [s]on corps [celui de Zahra] avec ses mains" (137), he searches and plays with her

"inaccessible" otherness, never actually grasping nor knowing it. This type of erotic relationship that focuses on the caress does not lead to a fusion of the two lovers into a oneness or totality, but rather into a pleasurable, mysterious encounter between two others. Levinas speaks to the poignant as well as ethical characteristics of such a passionate, loving relationship when he writes,

[l]e pathétique de l'amour consiste dans une dualité insurmontable des êtres. C'est une relation avec ce qui se dérobe à jamais. La relation ne neutralise pas *ipso facto* l'altérité, mais la conserve. Le pathétique de la volupté est dans le fait d'être deux. L'autre en tant qu'autre n'est pas ici un objet qui devient nous; il se retire au contraire dans son mystère (*Le Temps et l'autre* 78).

Luce Irigaray further elaborates Levinas's analysis of the ethical dimension of the caress in a love relationship by placing his notion within the context of sexual difference. Irigaray contrasts touch, which fosters difference, with the male gaze, which appropriates female otherness and thus sustains male sameness. "Regardant l'aimée, l'amant la ramène à moins que rien si ce regard est séduction à l'image, si sa nudité, non perçue dans sa palpitation jamais arrêtée, devient le site d'un masque et non l'étonnement devant ce qui ne cesse de secrètement se mouvoir" (*Éthique de la différence sexuelle* 179). However, in valorizing the sense of touch, the male lover, Irigaray

declares, forgoes the objectifying gaze. As Irigaray writes,

Génération nouvelle qui déconstitue et reconstitue la contemplation en retournant à la source de tous sens--le toucher. Il n'y a plus là d'image que celle qui s'abandonne et se donne. Avec les mains, entre autres. Sculptant comme une première fois, un premier jour. L'aimée ne s'abîmant dans l'enfance ou l'animalité que pour en renaître chair remodelée du dehors et du dedans (179).

Due to his blindness and resultant emphasis on the caress, the Consul, therefore, does not objectify his lover, Zahra. The absence of a male gaze in their relationship allows Zahra not only to keep and to nurture her difference, but also to strengthen her position as desiring subject, all of which, when combined, generates a kind of corporeal rebirth in Zahra. Echoing Irigaray's metaphorization of the ethical male lover (*l'amant*) as a sculptor whose hands recreate the female other's (*l'aimée's*) sense of difference, the narrator states,

Le miracle avait le visage et les yeux du Consul. Il m'avait sculptée en statue de chair, désirée et désirante. Je n'étais plus un être de sable et de poussière à l'identité incertaine, s'effritant au moindre coup de vent. Je sentais mes membres... Il m'avait fallu l'oubli, l'errance et la grâce distillée par l'amour, pour renaître et vivre (138).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ben Jelloun appears to draw here from the Pygmalion myth, especially from Venus's role in this mythical story. According to Ovid, Pygmalion was an artist in Cyprus who fell in love with a beautiful statue that he sculpted. At the Festival of Venus in Cyprus one year, Pygmalion prayed to the Goddess Venus to give him a wife who would resemble

Zahra's sudden feelings of "a solidified self" intimates her new sense of identity, of a limited narcissism that, as I discussed in the first chapter, Levinas, Kristeva and Cixous posit as essential to psychic survival. In fact, according to Kristeva, the "sujet-en-procès" must alternate between a sense of symbolic identity and that of semiotic otherness so as to avoid psychosis. Thus, as the sculpture metaphor of "solidification" and "consolidation" suggests, Zahra no longer dwells at the edge of psychosis as an "être de sable et de poussière à l'identité incertaine, s'effritante au moindre coup." Moreover, Zahra ironically discovers her body through the Consul's reverent touch while in a place which encourages the male gaze and objectification of women-the brothel.

When deprived of his touch while in prison, Zahra attempts to remain close to her lover by identifying with the Consul's otherness. Indeed, she spends most days in her cell blindfolded. In so doing, she relives his rejuvenating caress of her body. "La couche des ténèbres que je faisais venir à moi . . . m'aidait à me séparer de mon corps, à le laisser intact, gardant en un souvenir ardent les dernières

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the statue. Venus instead gave his statue life and Pygmalion later married the statue-turned-woman. (*Metamorphoses* 231-232). In Ben Jelloun's quote, however, Zahra, the newly transfigured "statue de chair," understands that it is the Consul's love for her, i.e., Venus's power, that gives her life.



caresses de l'homme que j'aimais" (151). Not wanting to usurp his difference, but simply trying to sympathize with his position, Zahra undergoes periodic instances of self-inflicted blindness and, in the process, learns of the positive attributes to her lack of sight.

Retrouver le noir me rassurait. J'étais ainsi en communion avec le Consul. Il ne le savait pas et je ne voulais pas qu'il le sût. Mon amour pour lui prenait le chemin de ses propres traverses et c'était pour moi l'unique moyen d'être avec lui. La cécité, quand elle est bien acceptée, donne une clairvoyance et une lucidité remarquables sur soi et sur les rapports avec les autres (145).

Indeed by imitating the Consul's blindness, Zahra ironically maintains "une clairvoyance," that is, an acknowledgment of her own internal difference as well as of the external other's alterity. As Cixous contends, such brief identifications with others evidences a narcissistic process that, paradoxically, embraces internal and external differences. Cixous writes that the "other bisexual" subject or, as I refer to it, the self in difference

os[e] ces traversées vertigineuses d'autres, éphémères et passionnés séjours en lui, elles, eux, qu'elle habite le temps de les regarder au plus près de l'inconscient dès leur lever, de les aimer au plus près de la pulsion, et ensuite plus loin, toute imprégnée de ces brèves identificatoires embrassades, elle va, et passe à l'infini (*La Jeune née* 162).

The blindfolded Zahra, much like Zahra the writer and the popular minstrel (as we later discuss in this chapter),

plays with external and internal otherness so as to will the togetherness of one-another (Cixous, *La Jeune née* 159).

However, later in the novel, Zahra's increasing play with her sense of alterity appears to instigate her psychic demise. In fact, after her sisters' violent clitoridectomy of her, Zahra comes dangerously close to falling into a state of psychosis.<sup>16</sup> The radical attempt to extinguish her female otherness or desire in the name of religion, that is, in the name of the Symbolic, further heightens Zahra's melancholic tendency to eschew the Symbolic, including language. Indeed, while recuperating from her clitoridectomy, Zahra dreams of meandering through a large hangar full of corpses. As narrator, she later recollects her peculiar dream.

Blessée sinistrée, je poursuivais mes errances nocturnes plus pour échapper à la douleur que pour faire de nouvelles rencontres. Je me frayai un chemin entre des corps décharnés suspendus dans un immense hangar. La peau sur les os, ils pendaient, nus, transparents. Une armée de corps vidés de toute substance attendait dans ce hangar. Je vis une porte à l'autre bout. J'avancai. Il y avait même une pancarte indiquant en plusieurs langues, avec des flèches vertes. Je suivis la direction des flèches. Je

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<sup>16</sup>In using the Latin term *cadere*, Kristeva conflates the image of *falling into* ineffable otherness or psychosis with that of death or *cadavers*. She claims, "[p]our le dépressif la Chose comme le moi sont des chutes qui l'entraînent dans l'invisible et l'innommable. *Cadere*. Tous déchets, tous cadavres" (*Soleil noir* 25). Thus, Kristeva's use of *cadere* reminds us of the life-threatening aspect of psychosis.

n'atteignis jamais la sortie. J'étais condamnée à errer dans cette chambre où régnaient un silence glacial et une odeur de peur (161).

This dream of dead bodies in a hangar contrasts with the Consul's earlier oneiric images wherein, as a writer, he visits a hangar filled with words. In the Consul's illusory "dépôt de mots," the people stood in line to procure words and phrases or "petits paquets" "dont ils pouvaient avoir besoin dans la semaine" (96) much like buying provisions for the week at the corner market. This correlation in the Consul's dream between signifiers and "little packages" of provisions points to the words' symbolic quality, as opposed to their semiotic aspect. Indeed, just as food is essential to one's existence, the "little packages" of symbolic language, according to Kristeva, provide a basic means to psychic survival. In other words, as stated earlier in this section, Kristeva contends that by utilizing symbolic language, one maintains a necessary sense of narcissistic identity that deters total self-fragmentation.

Contrary to the Consul's dream, Zahra's oneiric images, which contain bodies rather than words, underline the semiotic or corporeal aspect of language. However, the bodies in Zahra's dreams are dead which, when combined with the sign indicating the exit in several languages, suggest Zahra's imminent "exit" from language into a potentially deadly corporeal otherness or psychosis. Not yet able to

find the "exit" from language, she is condemned, for the time being, to wander within "cette chambrée où régnaient le silence glacial et une odeur de peur" (161). Meanwhile, Zahra's melancholic distress augments as she feels more and more fragmented, plunged into a general state of confusion without any recourse to moments of stability or inner peace. As the narrator recalls,

je me voyais aussi en épouvantail rempli de paille, qui au lieu d'effrayer les corbeaux les attirait, certains se contentant de faire leur nid sur mes épaules, d'autres allant jusqu'à faire des trous à la place des yeux. Je perdais le sens de ma présence au monde. Je me désagrégeais. J'avais l'impression de tomber en ruine et de me reconstituer à l'infini. Tout revenait avec la violence d'une tempête dans la tête. Tout se mélangeait. Je cherchais le moyen d'être soulagée de la douleur, pas uniquement celle qui, telle un poison, circulait dans mon sang, mais aussi celle que je commençais à ressentir après les visites du Consul. Il venait et restait silencieux. Sa présence pesait des tonnes. Il avait l'air trop accablé. Le malheur l'habitait. J'étais de plus en plus embrouillée, ébranlée, m'enfonçant dans la confusion et les visions cauchemardesques (167).

Imagining herself to be a useless "scarecrow," Zahra attracts crows that symbolically castrate her as they peck out her eyes. Powerless, the protagonist starts to psychically "disintegrate" into "infinity," thus apparently losing her sense of identity. Indeed, her internal state of "ruin" and "poison"-like "pain" announce Zahra's imminent psychic demise.

Watching Zahra grow increasingly silent and distant as she approaches psychosis,<sup>17</sup> the Consul suffers and realizes that his touch no longer has an effect on Zahra. He tells Zahra, "[a]ujourd'hui mes mains n'ont plus la force de vous regarder. Elles sont fatiguées. Elles se sentent inutiles et coupables. Je les sais négatives" (168). He then pleads with Zahra to stop her disintegration, clairvoyantly sensing her thoughts. "-Arrêtez de bouger, s'il vous plaît. -Mais je ne bouge pas... -Non, je sais, mais il y a un tel va-et-vient dans votre tête... j'entends vos pensées qui s'entrechoquent" (168). Later, he intimates how she can prevent psychosis through his example, that is, by loving the other. Otherwise stated, the Consul alludes to her own love for him as a means to regain her sense of identity and, in this way, to escape her psychic demise.

For Kristeva, the subject attains a limited narcissistic sense of self through love for the other insofar as this love then incites the self to incorporate not the external other but his or her language or the Symbolic. Kristeva writes, "De pouvoir recevoir les mots de

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<sup>17</sup>The Consul notices Zahra's silence and deep depression when he tells her, "(m)ais je vous sais loin, sur un autre continent, plus proche de la lune quand elle est pleine que de mon regard (170). Indeed, her proximity to "la lune quand elle est pleine" recalls the Kristevan melancholic's life under a "soleil noir" awaiting the onset of psychosis.

l'autre, de les assimiler, répéter, reproduire, je deviens comme lui: Un. Un sujet de l'énonciation. Par identification-osmose psychique. Par amour" (*Histoires d'amour* 37-38). Love, as Kristeva defines it, triggers the process of incorporating language which, in turn, becomes the means to an essential symbolic identity, albeit a continuously interrupted identity due to the frequent eruptions of semiotic otherness.

In the novel, during his last moments with Zahra, the Consul lauds the regenerative effects of writing and announces his plans to become a singer of tales. At this time, he also leaves her a letter in which he insists that Zahra focus on her feelings of love or, as he calls it, her "friendship," her "heart," or her "emotions" for him as the way to find her self or "soul." Just as the Consul continues to love her "ailleurs et autrement" (170), that is, as a traveling oral performer narrating their story in different villages, Zahra, he implies, should similarly "follow [her] heart." In the letter, he writes,

Seule l'amitié, don total de l'âme, lumière absolue, lumière sur lumière où le corps est à peine visible. L'amitié est une grâce; c'est ma religion, notre territoire; seule l'amitié redonnera à votre corps son âme qui a été malmenée. Suivez votre cœur. Suivez l'émotion qui traverse votre sang. Adieu, amie! (173)

In referring to love or "amitié" as a "light," a "religion" and their mutual "territory," that is, with terms that

connote the Symbolic, the Consul's letter fuses love with the Symbolic. Thus, he offers this synthesis as the path to reclaiming her "âme," i.e., to achieving a vital self in difference, one in which "le corps [the semiotic] est à peine visible" but, nevertheless, still present. Indeed, the Consul's letter conveys that love is not just pure affect, that is, the exhilarating experience of openness to the ineffable other, but also the equally important process of entering the other's language or the Symbolic "lumière absolue," of securing a limited sense of a narcissistic identity without which psychic death is the inevitable outcome.

After reading this letter, Zahra embraces meaningful language or the Symbolic through her love for the Consul insofar as she mimics the Consul; otherwise stated, she starts to write and to tell stories. By opening up to the Symbolic "light" or language, Zahra no longer dwells along the margins of psychosis nor attempts to identify with the Consul through silence and darkness. According to the narrator,

Après cela je renonçai au bandeau sur les yeux et à mes errances dans les ténèbres. Je commençais à être obsédée par l'idée d'une grande lumière qui viendrait du ciel ou de l'amour, elle serait tellement forte qu'elle rendrait mon corps transparent, qu'elle le laverait et lui redonnerait le bonheur d'être étonné, la naïveté de connaître des choses dans leur commencement. Cette idée m'excitait (173).

Zahra's thoughts here seem to announce her imminent use of symbolic language--"[j]e commençais à être obsédée par l'idée d'une grande lumière"--to help attain and maintain a comforting sense of stable identity. In fact, the protagonist suspects that in so doing she will experience a corporeal "bonheur" or, in other words, a jubilant sense of inner difference, vacillating between limited narcissism and alterity. In the following two sections, I examine how Zahra's reading as well as her writing and oral narration become reliable means to reawaken and to enjoy her alternating sense of identity and of otherness.

### Reading and Listening to the Other

From the beginning, Ben Jelloun's novel alludes to the pleasurable effects of aesthetic activity. For instance, the day after her father's death, which represents her partial freedom from the Symbolic or paternal law and from linear, rational symbolic language, Zahra's imagination runs wild; she sees everything in a new, different (Symbolic) light. "Tout s'est calmé, ou plutôt tout a changé. Il m'était difficile de ne pas établir la coïncidence entre ce vieillard qui venait enfin de se retirer de la vie et cette clarté presque surnaturelle qui inonda les êtres et les choses" (33). The protagonist's bursts of imagination



transport her into what she poetically depicts as "le jardin parfumé." Imagining herself to be escorted by a prince or Cheikh on horseback out of a cemetery, the place of death, and into an enchanted garden, the space of growth and potential change, Zahra undergoes an intense moment of rebirth and *jouissance*.

Enveloppée dans le bournous, j'étais derrière, mes bras entouraient sa taille. Les secousses de la jument faisaient que mes bras croisés caressaient dans un mouvement de haut en bas son ventre ferme. J'avais une impression étrange à laquelle je me laissais aller, renonçant à me poser des questions comme lorsqu'un rêve se poursuit dans la petite somnolence. C'était la première fois que je montais à cheval. J'accumulais ainsi les émotions avec une liberté intérieure qui réchauffait tout mon corps. L'aventure, c'était d'abord ce sentiment d'étrangeté d'où naissait le plaisir. Ma tête reposait contre son dos, je fermai les yeux et murmurai un chant d'enfance (39-40).

Zahra's "first horseback ride" with the mysterious Cheikh during which she caresses his stomach with her arms conveys a sexual moment given that it incites her "liberté intérieure qui réchauffait tout [s]on corps." These erotic images seem to intimate not only her sexual awakening but also her loss of virginity, thereby signaling the end of her childhood. Nevertheless, Zahra's joyful "sentiment d'étrangeté" or *jouissance* augments as she gallops into an imaginary land, populated exclusively by children, one of whom eventually offers a description of the group of youths and of the underground village they inhabit that suggests

the ineffable unconscious. "Nous sommes le secret, alors nous vivons sous terre. Le village n'a pas de nom. Il n'existe pas. Il est en chacun de nous" (49).<sup>16</sup>

As she enters this underground village of children, the protagonist sings a song from childhood--"je fermai les yeux et murmurai un chant d'enfance"--as well as listens to a poem which serves as a password into this "perfumed garden."

Des obstacles étaient dressés et gardés par des enfants. Il fallait à chaque fois dire le mot de passe, lequel était composé de quatre phrases, le tout était un poème que mon cavalier connaissait parfaitement: 'Nous sommes les enfants, les hôtes de la terre Nous sommes faits de terre et nous lui reviendrons. Pour nous, terrestres, le bonheur ne dure guère, mais des nuits de bonheur effacent l'affliction' (40-41).

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<sup>16</sup>The Cheikh, who is the only adult allowed into this underground village, represents the Symbolic order or language insofar as he maintains order in the village "sans hiérarchie, sans police ni armée [où il n'y a plus de lois écrites]" (41). His presence here thus avoids a perpetual state of unconscious chaos. Indeed, the same mythical child depicts the vital tie between the village (the unconscious) and the Cheikh (the Symbolic).

Le Cheikh est notre emblème; notre sort est lié au sien. S'il succombe à la tentation, ce sera notre perte. Entre lui et nous il y a un pacte, un serment... nous sommes une tribu en dehors du temps... Le Cheikh est le seul qui soit resté trempé dans le temps. C'est pour cela qu'il nous quitte parfois. Généralement, il revient avec des grains à semer (49).

This pact for life between the Cheikh and the children of the underground village metaphorizes the interdependency between the Symbolic and the unconscious within the subject. This metaphor of the protagonist's divided self, in turn, brings to mind, once again, Kristeva's notion of an essential coexistence in self of both semiotic otherness and symbolic sameness or identity for psychic survival.

To the extent that the poem which grants her entry into her unconscious, underground garden is one that she read during her adolescence--"[j]e ne reconnus pas tout de suite la poésie d'Abû-l-Alâ al-Ma'arrî [que] j'avais lu[e] durant mon adolescence" (41)-- that is to say, during the period of sexual awakening, her memories of this particular poem further heighten her sense of *jouissance*. Moreover, the poem itself speaks to the redemptive qualities of the blissful "nuits de bonheur" which attenuate disconcerting thoughts of our mortality such as, "[n]ous sommes faits de terre et nous lui reviendrons."

Thus, Zahra's fertile imagination and her use of poetic, sexually suggestive language in this dreamlike sequence present her means, as Cixous describes it, to fly/steal (*voler*) both into the Symbolic (i.e., language) and into her otherness (or her "perfumed garden"), which, subsequently, initiate her rapturous sense of change and of flux within. Indeed, Zahra's liberating, erotic voyage into her internal difference is akin to Cixous's depiction of the reader's and writer's flight into heterogeneity.

Hétérogène, oui, à son bénéfice joyeux elle est érogène, elle est l'érogénéité de l'hétérogène; ce n'est pas à elle-même qu'elle tient, la nageuse aérienne, la voleuse. Dispersable, prodigue, étourdissante, désireuse et capable d'autre, de l'autre femme qu'elle sera, de l'autre femme qu'elle n'est pas, de lui, de toi (*La Jeune née* 164).

It appears then that the protagonist's imaginative transports and her poetic inclinations which facilitate her initial, pleasurable voyage or "flight" into her own otherness early on in the novel, prefigure Zahra's aesthetic *jouissance*, i.e., her reading, writing and oral narration as practices that foster an opening out into otherness. Moreover, her hallucinated journey into the strange land of children highlights the characteristic inspirational role of childhood in the writer's work. As Cixous states in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, "Most poets are saved children: they are people who have kept their childhood alive and absolutely present" (66-67).

Before we consider how the novel reflects narration--verbal and written, let us first examine in this section *La Nuit*'s thematization of reading. While imprisoned, Zahra's reading becomes an active process whereby she projects herself onto and plays with characters.

Je ne pouvais m'empêcher de faire des projections sur tous les personnages des récits que je lisais. Je leur bandais les yeux systématiquement ou je les envoyais en prison pour homicide volontaire avec préméditation. Ma lecture n'était jamais innocente. Il m'arrivait même de transférer un personnage d'une histoire à une autre. Cela m'amusait et me permettait d'agir un peu. Tout cela s'embrouillait dans ma tête (145).

This type of imaginative play in reading, which instigates the protagonist's confused psychic state, brings to mind Cixous's depictions of the frightening yet exciting

practice--"la terrible beauté"--("L'Approche de Clarice Lispector" 115) of reading difference. According to Cixous, this kind of reading, like writing, represents

le passage, entrée, séjour de l'autre que je suis et je ne suis pas, que je ne sais pas être, mais que je sens passer, qui me fait vivre,--qui me déchire, m'inquiète, m'altère, qui ?--une, un, des ?, plusieurs, de l'inconnu qui me donne justement l'envie de connaître à partir de laquelle s'élance toute vie. Ce peuplement ne laisse ni repos ni sécurité, trouble toujours le rapport au "réel", produit des effets d'incertitude" (*La Jeune née* 158).

Thus, by projecting herself, mixing characters and plots, as well as identifying with various characters in her readings, the protagonist experiences contradictory feelings or the strangeness of "l'autre en moi" (*La Jeune née* 159).

Furthermore, Zahra's non-linear, bizarre readings appear to echo her nonsensical dreams. Reiterating Kristeva's metaphorical image of unconscious otherness as the "foreigner" or "stranger," Cixous finds that dreaming, like the process of reading and writing, also leads us "toward foreign lands, toward the foreigner in ourselves. Traveling in the unconscious, that inner foreign country, foreign home, country of lost countries" (*Three Steps* 69-70). In fact, reading and writing difference, Cixous goes on to say, should attempt to imitate dreams. Not only do her dreams affect Zahra's reading, but the converse becomes apparent as well in Ben Jelloun's novel. Indeed, the

protagonist's readings heighten her dreams' potential as processes that help unveil internal difference. The narrator explains that each text she read during the day in jail "peuplait ensuite mes nuits où rêves, cauchemars et écran blanc se confondaient et me harcelaient. J'étais peu à peu devenue moi-même un personnage de ces nuits agitées et rocambolesques, à tel point que je m'empressais de dormir pour, enfin, vivre des aventures hors du commun(145). As the protagonist conflates her dreams and nightmares along with an "écran blanc," which alludes to the indescribable aspect of these oneiric images, Zahra oscillates between pleasure and anxiety. She thereby illustrates the paradoxical experience of, as Freud refers to it, the *unheimliche* that usually accompanies the reawakening of one's unnameable, semiotic, unconscious other or "stranger within."<sup>19</sup>

Yet, in spite of her mixed reaction to her eruptions of an internal "étrangeté" when both reading and dreaming, Zahra, nevertheless, tends to underscore the positive, freeing aspects of her otherness. For instance, Zahra, as

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<sup>19</sup>See my examination of Kristeva's synthesis between one's reaction to the foreigner or "étranger" and the Freudian sense of the *unheimliche* or "étrangeté" in Chapter One, in the section entitled "The Self In and Respectful of Difference."

narrator, explains her past identifications with the novels' characters as follows:

J'étais ainsi engagée dans une histoire d'amour cruelle où j'étais à la fois Sasuke le disciple amoureux de son professeur, maître de musique, et cette même femme Shunkin, rendue aveugle parce qu'une bouilloire d'eau brûlante avait été versée sur son visage. J'étais l'homme et la femme à la fois, tantôt ange possédé par la grâce et l'amour, tantôt orage vengeur et sans pitié. J'étais la note de musique et l'instrument, la passion et la souffrance. Il m'arrivait tellement d'histoires que je confondais tout avec plaisir, curieuse de voir ce que la nouvelle nuit allait m'apporter comme habits (145-46).

Always flying/stealing into and, in so doing, embracing the human other's uniqueness irregardless of sex in her dreams and readings, Zahra thus takes pleasure in, as Cixous calls it, her "autre bisexualité," that is, her internal difference. Indeed, Zahra's description of her dreams and readings parallels Cixous's portrayal of her own "autre bisexualité" when reading the other.<sup>20</sup>

Et j'ai su aimer. J'ai aimé puissamment des femmes et des hommes: je connaissais le prix d'un être unique, sa beauté, sa douceur. Je ne me posais aucune question mesquine, j'ignorais les limites, je jouissais sans angoisse de ma bisexualité: que les deux genres en moi s'harmonisent me paraissait tout naturel. Je ne pensais même pas qu'il pût en être autrement (*La Jeune née* 134-35).

Moreover, Zahra's excessive, ecstatic identification with everything, that is, with objects, sounds, and sentiments,

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<sup>20</sup>See Chapter 1, the section "Writing and Reading the Ambiguous Text: A Means To The Self In Difference" for a more thorough examination of Cixous's notion of an "autre bisexualité."

in addition to the characters, exemplifies Cixous's depiction of reading difference as a revitalizing practice that breaks one's narcissistic, static identity. For Cixous, reading the other involves "aimer le vrai du vivant, ce qui semble *ingrat* aux yeux de narcisses, le sans-prestige, le sans-actualité, aimer l'origine, s'intéresser personnellement à l'impersonnel, à l'animal, à la chose. À l'autre ("L'Approche de Clarice Lispector" 115).

Thus, while confined to a small crypt-like prison cell, which, as noted previously, intensifies Zahra's melancholia, her reading and dreaming the other grant her, nonetheless, moments of rejuvenating bliss. In fact, to the extent that it manipulates characters, imagery, and plot, the protagonist's combination of reading and dreaming resembles the creative writing process which offers, as Kristeva insists, a temporary "solution sublimatoire de [ses] crises" (*Soleil noir* 35). Like Cixous, Kristeva points to the anti-narcissistic dimensions of such creative activity as practiced by Zahra. However, Kristeva's notion focuses more on language. For Kristeva, reading and writing fragmented, ambiguous language destabilize meaning and, in turn, the static self. More specifically, because symbolic language upholds a unified, narcissistic perception of self, reading and writing texts that disrupt meaningful language



subsequently subvert narcissistic identity (*Révolution* 203). By periodically dissolving narcissism and thereby stimulating inner difference, creative reading and writing qualify as ethical textual practices, according to Kristeva.<sup>21</sup> Zahra's imaginative reading-dreaming thus instantiates the Kristevan idea of an ethical textual practice.

*La Nuit* further highlights reading as an experience of otherness with an imaginary library-brothel. The Consul relates to Zahra his dreams of an underground library where women narrate memorized fiction to readers-listeners in exchange for money.

[U]ne firme avait engagé de jolies femmes qui apprenaient par coeur un roman, un conte ou une pièce de théâtre, et qui se proposaient, moyennant finances, de venir chez vous pour se faire lire, ou plus exactement pour dire le livre qu'elles avaient appris. Ce devait être un marché clandestin. On me fit payer un ticket à l'entrée (97-98).

The Consul's correlation between the female prostitute and the literary text may, at first, appear to propose that the text, like the prostitute as she is most commonly perceived, is simply consumed for pleasure. However, if we consider the Consul's approach to Zahra's female alterity during their sexual encounters in a real brothel, the Consul's

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<sup>21</sup>For further analysis of Kristeva's notion of an ethical textual practice, see Chapter One, the section entitled "The Revolutionary Text In Difference."

text-female correspondence in the above quote intimates a different kind of reading, specifically an ethical reading of difference. As we have already seen, in the Consul's erotic relations with Zahra, he depends on the caress, rather than the appropriating gaze, and, in so doing, displays his appreciation and respect for his lover's separateness. In light of his reverence for Zahra's difference, the Consul's conflation of the female body and the text in his dream equates the practice of loving and respecting the other's uniqueness with the process of reading a text. In other words, the Consul's dream suggests that the text becomes a mysterious other which precludes the reader from simply consuming the text and, instead, invites the reader to search for and to play with its strangeness.

Such a depiction of reading recalls Roland Barthes's notion of the "texte de jouissance." *Jouissance*, for Barthes, entails a paradoxically joyful and disquieting loss of self. Accordingly, he defines a "texte de jouissance" as

celui qui met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte (peut-être jusqu'à un certain ennui), fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage (*Le Plaisir du texte* 25-26).

Indeed, the Consul's image of the library as brothel symbolizes his sense of *jouissance* when reading otherness in texts. More specifically, the Consul's unparalleled joy

mixed with some discomfort--"j'avoue que parfois tous ces mirages me fatiguent [et] me harcelent" (99)--while in this imaginary, underground library alludes to his reading as a blissful experience of, as Barthes defines it, a disrupted identity. The Consul confesses, "C'est un pays fabuleux. Un pays éclairé par les lumières de mes nuits d'insomnie. Quand je le quitte, je deviens triste. Il me manque à chaque fois que j'ouvre mes yeux sur les ténèbres éternelles" (99). Thus, while he dreams of reading difference or, in Kristevan terms, of engaging in the "hyperlucidité cognitive des déprimés" (*Soleil noir* 70), the Consul sublimates his melancholia. Indeed, as the Consul mentions in the above quote, whenever he is not in his illusory, subterranean library where he reads his female other, that is, his "autre bisexualité," he "becomes sad."

Moreover Ben Jelloun's novel itself fosters a reading in difference. For instance, the many enigmatic, disturbing and/or taboo scenes throughout the novel, such as Zahra's choice of rape as her first sexual encounter, her assassination of her uncle, the Consul's and his sister's incestuous relations, the Consul's frequent visits to the brothel, all seem to function as disquieting interruptions of what would otherwise be a poetic love story between a man and a woman. Additionally, the novel presents a curious

juxtaposition of antithetical styles and tones. On the one hand, the narrator's language is reminiscent of sacred, poetic language as she quotes passages from the *Coran* (17) (79) and discusses Islamic beliefs. For example, Zahra states,

[a]mis, à partir de cette nuit de l'Exceptionnel, les jours ont pris de nouvelles couleurs, les murs ont capté des chants nouveaux, les pierres ont libéré des échos longtemps retenus, les terrasses ont été envahies d'une lumière très vive et les cimetières se sont tus. . . . Comment ne pas croire que la Nuit du Destin est une nuit terrible pour les uns, libératrice pour les autres?" (33)

Zahra also refers to her audience as "Amis" which is typical of those who recite the *Coran* to listeners.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Zahra employs, at times, slang and vulgar language, e.g., "Un derrière" (36), "les salopes! Elles m'ont refilé la borgne..." (109), "putain" (139), "espèce de salaud" (156). These instances of obscene language along with the taboo scenes potentially interrupt a gratifying reading of *La Nuit*. In other words, these repeated disruptions of Zahra's poetic love story evidence, as Barthes defines it in *Le Plaisir du texte*, not a *texte de plaisir* which comforts the real reader<sup>23</sup> and thereby enhances his or her stable sense of identity, but rather a *texte de jouissance* which

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<sup>22</sup>In the last section of this chapter, I discuss the language used by religious oral narrators.

<sup>23</sup>See note 1 for a definition of real reader.

evokes the reader's unease or loss of self and, in so doing, disturbs his or her narcissistic self-image. Capable of intermittently undermining the real reader's unified, stable sense of self, these taboo images and slang render *La Nuit* an ethical text in difference. Indeed, as we recently noted above, Kristeva refers to the narrative disruption of the narcissistic self as an "ethical practice" in *La Révolution du langage poétique*.<sup>24</sup> For Kristeva, however, an ethical practice or text entails the disquieting semiotic interruptions of symbolic language that concomitantly challenge one's narcissistic self-perception. Nevertheless, in light of Barthes's notion of the *texte de jouissance*, the troubling taboo scenes and vulgar language in *La Nuit*, which may elicit the reader's strange sense of difference, also qualify Ben Jelloun's novel as an ethical text.

Not only does the novel present the reading of the other at the pseudo-diegetic level and possibly encourage the reading of difference, *La Nuit* further alludes to reading the other throughout its extradiegetic as well as diegetic levels. Zahra, the implied author, for instance, asks her implied readers to read the lines on her face and hands.

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<sup>24</sup>See Chapter 1, under the section "Revolutionary Text In Difference" for further analysis of Kristeva's definition of the "ethical practice."

Mes rides sont belles et nombreuses. Celles sur le front sont les traces et les épreuves de la vérité. Elles sont l'harmonie du temps. Celles sur le dos des mains sont les lignes du destin. Regardez comme elles se croisent, désignent des chemins de fortune, dessinant une étoile après sa chute dans l'eau d'un lac. L'histoire de ma vie est écrite là: chaque ride est un siècle, une route par une nuit d'hiver, une source d'eau claire un matin de brume, une rencontre dans une forêt, une rupture, un cimetière, un soleil incendiaire... (5-6).

Given the obvious impossibility for the implied reader of this novel to see her anatomical body, this invitation to read her body symbolizes a request for the readers to prepare to read her semiotic or corporeal otherness in the lines of her autobiographical text, i.e., of her textual body. Indeed, she defines her own story as undefinable and "étrange" (6), which will, as a result, require the implied reader to read differently, that is, to read difference.

Furthermore, prior to telling her story to a circle of listeners in Marrakesh, Zahra encounters a female oral performer-dancer whose "body" is essential to her narrative process.

[J]e vis une femme tourner sur elle-même pour dérouler l'immense haïk blanc qui lui servait de djellaba. Cette façon de se dévoiler, exécutée comme une danse, avait quelque chose d'érotique. Je le sentis tout de suite en remarquant le mouvement subtil, à peine rythmé, des hanches. Elle levait les bras lentement presque à faire bouger ses seins. Un cercle de curieux se forma très vite autour d'elle. . . . Qu'était-elle venue faire sur cette place réservée aux hommes et à quelques vieilles mendiantes? (16)

This female oral performer's erotic dance prefigures both the integration of the semiotic otherness of the body in the narrator's own fragmented and rhythmic text/body as well as the potential feelings of *jouissance* that such a text may elicit in the implied reader. The storyteller's young, female presence in a space reserved for men and a few older women also foreshadows the narrator's story of her own shocking existence in the male world, insofar as Zahra worked in the business offices, prayed in the mosques, and bathed in the male-only *hammams*.

Moreover, Zahra's focus on this and other popular minstrels underscores not only the style and content of her own narration but the positive dimensions of *listening* to such language as well. Zahra depicts the scene wherein she is first struck by the Consul's tendency to listen to *how* she speaks rather than to the content of her speech. "Et justement cet homme non voyant voyait avec tous les autres sens. Il aurait été impossible de lui mentir. On ne ment pas à un aveugle. On peut lui raconter des histoires. Mais il se fie plus à la voix qu'aux phrases qu'on prononce" (134). The Consul, it seems, listens for Zahra's self in difference, by noticing her gaps or silences, breaks in voice, fragmentation in language, repetitions and ambiguities, all of which constitute the eruptions of her

semiotic otherness in her speech. Towards the end of the novel, the Consul's practice of listening to her elliptical speech finally instigates his own sense of alterity or "strangeness." "Ô amie! Depuis que je suis votre voix, depuis qu'elle me mène vers des nuits enveloppées dans de la soie et tachées de sang, je suis dans l'étrange" (170). He also confides his subsequent narrative quest for his own self in difference when he tells Zahra,

je ne cesse de chercher un abri, un lieu pour mes pensées, pour mon corps fatigué. J'essaie d'écarter les lèvres cousues de ma mère sous terre. Entendre, ne serait-ce qu'une fois sa voix... l'entendre me bénir ou me maudire... Mais l'entendre. Je sais que je dois faire le voyage des ténèbres, loin de tout, dans le désert, dans l'extrême Sud. Pour le moment j'écris, et je dois vous avouer que je le fais sous votre dictée. Ce que j'écris m'effraie et me possède (169).

Like reading difference, listening to his own semiotic (m)other or "mère sous terre" similarly encourages the Consul both to narrate orally his "ténèbres" as a singer of tales wandering "dans le désert, dans l'extrême Sud" as well as to write difference. The Consul's act of listening also brings to mind the psychoanalytic relationship wherein the analyst and the analysand listen to each other's strange speech as a means to self-discovery and mutual self-respect: "La psychanalyse s'éprouve alors comme un voyage dans l'étrangeté de l'autre et de soi-même, vers une éthique du



respect pour l'inconciliable" (Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* 269).

Zahra finally recognizes the power of her speech to incite others to open up to alterity years later when she comes to Marrakesh as an old woman. In addition to telling the implied readers of her fictional autobiography to read her body/text, Zahra directly calls on them, in the preamble, to *listen* to her narrative as well. Indeed, she refers to the implied readers as her *listeners* insofar as she repeatedly addresses them with the traditional Arabic appellations--such as, "Amis du Bien!" (5)--typically employed by North African oral storytellers.

Zahra's depiction of her own listening practice further indicates how the implied readers of Ben Jelloun's novel should *listen* to the language of this narrative. Bouchaïb, the old, famous oral performer, is now apparently suffering from the onset of psychosis brought on by his being "possédé par l'indéfinissable" (11), that is, his "tristesse [qui] n'a plus de fond" (10). Consequently, he starts to lose his audience. However, Zahra's attention to how he speaks, to his fragmented language, to his "silences faits d'absence et d'attente" (9), and to his "phrases inachevées, hachées, pleines de cailloux et de salive" (10) displays an awareness of the old popular minstrel's search for the undefinable

other which so affected his language. Unlike the many other listeners who are confused and unsatisfied and eventually leave Bouchaïb's circle, her respect for his story offers us, as readers of *La Nuit*, a model response to her own circular and puzzling narrative. Moreover, like the Consul who listens to Zahra's bizarre language and then writes his other-ness, Zahra, too, begins to voice and thus to appreciate her own bizarre self/text in difference, after listening to others' strange and disquieting stories.

### Narrating the Other

Before starting her story at the circle in Marrakesh, Zahra, as the older, more self-aware narrator, alludes to the impossibility of ever defining her self/text in difference. Using the house as metaphor for both self and text, she announces that she is about to open the last, impossible door in this house.

Je suis là depuis hier, poussée par le vent, consciente d'être arrivée à la dernière porte, celle que personne n'a ouverte, celle réservée aux âmes déchues, la porte à ne pas nommer, car elle donne sur le silence, dans cette maison où les questions tombent en ciment entre les pierres (19).

Opening this unnameable door ("à ne pas nommer") connotes the act of telling her story of her self, which entails approaching the self's unsayable otherness through a necessarily fragmented and ambiguous, i.e., confusing,

narrative. Indeed, unanswered questions become part of the self/text/house, given that "les questions tombent en ciment entre les pierres."

Zahra then announces to her narratees that if they listen to her strange language, the "secret" of her text/self/house will gradually become less "obscur, jusqu'à la nudité invisible" (20). In other words, they will come to understand that, although she displays all of her self in her "nudity," she remains ungraspable, "invisible." She further promises not to lie (20), that is, not to use conventional language that would give the illusion of defining her identity. Zahra declares instead that she will employ poetic, equivocal images as a more effective means of conveying this house/self, images that do not seek to comprehend and thus inhibit her otherness. "Je me souviens de tout avec une précision étonnante. Si j'utilise des images c'est parce que nous ne nous connaissons pas encore (20). Indeed, in addition to her self-representation as a "house," Zahra then goes on to refer to herself, metaphorically, as a "lune des lunes," "un être de sable," "un épouvantail," an individual enclosed within a crypt, etc. Zahra even underscores the pain involved in the attempt to define one's identity with precise or unambiguous language. "Vous verrez, dans ma maison les mots tombent comme des gouttes d'acide. J'en sais quelque chose: ma peau

en témoigne" (20). Unlike poetic images, words--"des gouttes d'acide"--or, in Lacanian terms, the Symbolic, can only "burn," that is, repress the otherness of her body, as Zahra's "peau en témoigne." In fact, for the first twenty years of her life, the narrator-protagonist was literally forced by the Symbolic or rather by the F/father's "word" or law to suppress her female difference in order to live as a man.

Refusing to limit herself to the exclusive use of symbolic, linear and unambiguous language, Zahra divides her narrative into several levels creating a complicated, labyrinthian text that complements her psychic/sexual ambivalent self. These narrative levels include the extradiegetic narration in the preamble, the diegesis wherein Zahra arrives at Marrakesh and listens to other popular minstrels, and the pseudo-diegesis which is her story as a young woman. Moreover, within her pseudo- or metadiegesis, she recounts both herself and others telling meta-metadiegetic stories such as when the Assise tells her past to Zahra and when the Consul and Zahra periodically exchange anecdotes. Additionally, the novel's different narrative frames often intersect and overlap, thereby heightening the implied readers' perplexity. For example, as Zahra talks to her narratees at the circle in Marrakesh, she often punctuates her pseudo-diegetic story with diegetic

references to this audience of listeners: "Amis!" (19), "Amis!" (33), "Croyez-moi, mes amis" (48), and "Je suis incapable de vous dire..." (155). However, these addresses could also refer to the implied reader and, in so doing, qualify as extradiegetic as well. The historical moment in which the story takes place and the span of the narrative are also left unclear.<sup>25</sup>

Zahra's narrative is interrupted by strange scenes that further confuse both the implied readers and her narratees who do not know whether these occurrences represent dreams, hallucinations or reality. Zahra, as narrator, even admits that she, like the reader/listener, is unable to distinguish these bizarre images. Just prior to relating one such happening wherein her sisters taunt and scare her, Zahra tells her audience: "Je suis incapable aujourd'hui de vous dire si c'était une vision, un cauchemar, une hallucination ou une réalité" (155). The end of the novel, in fact, offers yet another one of these enigmatic moments when the implied reader is left wondering if the narrator is telling us a comforting dream of her reunion with the Assise and the

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<sup>25</sup>The narration apparently takes place sometime after 1922 given that, at the beginning of the narrative, Zahra, the narrator, looks at an old picture of a family of French colonizers signed "Lazarre 1922" (15). Yet, the novel never indicates as to whether the narrator tells her story during the colonial or post-colonial era, thereby leaving the real or actual reader in the dark.

Consul or a hallucination which intimates her fall into psychosis (186-189). Indeed, her worsening melancholia coupled with her allusion in the preamble to her own return or recovery point to Zahra's possible psychosis. In the opening page, the implied author confides, "[j]'ai mis du temps pour arriver jusqu'à vous. Amis du Bien! La place est toujours ronde. Comme la folie. Rien n'a changé. Ni le ciel ni les hommes" (5). However, the narrator never elucidates her previous psychic state, thereby aggravating the implied readers' uncertainty. We may surmise then that the circular "place" in which the narrator speaks emblemizes her equivocal narrative.

Thus, Zahra practices a poetic, circular, and, at times, illogical narrative that is devoid of a single, obvious meaning which, as J. Hillis Miller posits, exemplifies "the search for a perhaps impossible proximity to the law" or to the "truth" (25) of the undefinable text/self. Ethics, argues Miller, is the narrative process of displaying the inability to grasp "truth."

[I]nsofar as narrative takes place within the space of perpetual deferral of direct confrontation with the law, it can be said that narrative is the narration of the impossibility of narrative in the sense of a coherent, logical, perspicuous story with beginning, middle, end, and paraphrasable meaning. The function of narrative, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear with and understand, is to keep this out in the open" (Miller 25).

In the first two pages of this novel, the implied author adumbrates her ethical narrative in which she elucidates the inability to attain the "truth" or the "coherent, logical meaning" of her text/self in difference. In the opening sentence of the novel, Zahra informs the readers of *La Nuit* that she is ready to narrate her "truth" when she states, "Ce qui importe c'est la vérité" (5). Yet, on the next page, she displays her awareness of the impossibility to voice "truth" when she clarifies that her narration is not the "truth" but rather "ressemble à la vérité" (6). Thus, as Zahra begins to narrate the "truth" of her self, she admits that her string of signifiers will, on the contrary, convey the impossibility of such a "truth." Indeed, her circular text does not offer, in Miller's words, "a beginning, middle and end" nor "a paraphrasable meaning" that would give the illusion of attaining "truth." In fact, her never-ending linguistic play celebrates, rather than grasps, her ineffable self. Like loving, reading, and dreaming, narrating therefore temporarily sublimates her melancholic pain, which, as noted earlier, is instigated by her inability to comprehend her self in difference.

Ben Jelloun's text underscores linguistic play when a singer of tales displays a plethora of objects that elicit his ludic accumulation of signifiers. While unearthing the

objects from deep within his tattered suitcase, the oral performer proclaims,

Regardez à présent ce chapelet... du corail, de l'ambre, de l'argent... Il a dû appartenir à un imam. Peut-être que la femme le portait comme collier... Des pièces de monnaie... un rial troué... un centime... un franc marocain... Des billets de banque qui n'ont plus de valeur... Un dentier... Une brosse... Un bol de porcelaine... (15)

Playing on the double signified of "argent," the oral performer jumps from a description of the rosary's precious materials to a naming of different currencies and then again back to a list of objects composed of another delicate material, porcelain. Such a play with words anticipates Zahra's own ambiguous, circular language as her way to impart her ineffable alterity.

The unending, ludic process of naming the unnameability of the unsayable other is again suggested when the Consul repeatedly types the same word, thereby stressing the futility of ever defining otherness. As Zahra notes, "[o]n entendait le bruit de la machine à écrire, un bruit régulier, on aurait dit que le Consul tapait toujours le même mot, avec obstination" (106). The repetition of the same word, in fact, also brings to mind that this novel, *La Nuit sacrée*, repeats the same story of Ahmed-Zahra already presented in Ben Jelloun's previous novel *L'Enfant de sable*. Thus, by virtue of reiterating the story of a prior text,



albeit in changed form, *La Nuit*, in its entirety, emblemizes the playful circularity of signifiers that convey the ineffability of Ahmed-Zahra, a self/text in difference.

The Consul also recognizes the positive potential of presenting the self through play and then shares his revelations with Zahra in the following quote.

Jouer n'est pas tromper, mais révéler les vertus de l'obscur. C'est comme pour l'intelligence, je ne sais plus qui l'avait définie comme étant l'incompréhension du monde. Cela nous ramène à nos poètes mystiques pour qui l'apparence était le masque le plus pervers de la vérité. Vous savez, puisque vous l'avez vécu dans votre corps, que la clarté est un leurre. Qu'est-ce qu'il y a de clair, de définissable, dans les rapports entre deux êtres? (133-34).

It is not rational thinking ("l'intelligence") but strange poetic writing ("nos poètes mystiques") that unveils and embraces the ungraspable and therefore dark other ("l'obscur") within and without. By living most of her life with an ambiguous gender identity, Zahra, the Consul understands, has always played with her internal difference. The Consul eventually tells Zahra that he acknowledges and respects her gender ambivalence which, he notes, tends to distance her from others. "Et je vous vois tantôt homme tantôt femme, superbe créature de l'enfance, échappant à l'amitié, à l'amour. Vous êtes hors de toute atteinte, être de l'obscur, ombre dans la nuit de mes souffrances. Il

m'arrive de crier sans me rendre compte 'Qui êtes-vous?' "  
 (170) "Je voudrais vous dire, vous supplier même de rester  
 ce que vous êtes, de poursuivre votre route (170).

In discerning the undefinable aspect of the self, both Zahra and the Consul tend to laugh. The Consul, for example, admits, "J'aime rire quand rien ne va, parce que rien n'est vraiment clair, rien n'est absolument obscur. Je dirais que tout est complexe et que la vérité est plus proche de l'ombre que de l'arbre qui donne cette ombre" (133) Laughter, for the Consul, manifests one's acceptance that the "truth" of self is an enigma and therefore impossible to comprehend with the logical mind or the "tree of knowledge." The protagonist, moreover, links laughter to aesthetic activity when she declares, "[a]lors il vaut mieux rire... nous ne faisons que passer... Ne permettons pas au temps de s'ennuyer en notre présence; faisons en sorte qu'on lui donne quelques satisfactions, avec un peu de fantaisie" (105), i.e., creative activity.

In her seminal essay "Le Rire de la Méduse," Cixous, in fact, correlates the act of writing difference with laughter. Both laughter and poetic writing similarly evoke enjoyable bursts of corporeal freedom that mock and undermine society's narcissistic notions of a stable, unified identity. Concomitantly, laughter and the writing of difference challenge one's fear of the repressed other or

of the "Méduse," as Cixous calls it. Indeed, it is this revived sense of a heretofore threatening alterity in such writing that liberates us and makes us laugh. "Il suffit qu'on regarde la méduse en face pour la voir: et elle n'est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit" (47). Given Cixous's correspondence between writing the other and laughter, both the Consul's and Zahra's instances of laughter appear to prefigure a more elaborate form of laughter--their writing of or linguistic playing with difference.

Even in the beginning, the novel emphasizes the positive dimensions of play in aesthetic activity. Just before Zahra first experiences her internal difference as she frolics in her imaginary garden, she notices the following events: "Un récitant du Coran s'était assoupi sur une tombe. Des enfants jouaient sur les arbres. Un couple d'amoureux s'était caché derrière une pierre tombale assez haute pour pouvoir s'embrasser sans être vu. Un jeune étudiant lisait *Hamlet* en marchant et gesticulant" (37). The juxtaposition of these instances of narrating, reading, loving, and playing with Zahra's initial imaginary voyage into her underground village or unconscious otherness intimates the potential of each of these activities to incite an awareness of and respect for the other. Yet, by

grouping examples of narrating, reading, and loving, all of which are thematized in this novel, with an instance of children playing, *La Nuit* highlights, it seems, the essential playful aspect of each of the three former activities. Indeed, as we have seen, Ben Jelloun's novel underscores how the protagonist-narrator's playful moments of loving, reading, and narrating lead to her ethical appreciation of otherness.

Further underlining the potential of aesthetic play early on in the text, Zahra's pseudo-diegetic narrative begins during the "nuit sacrée, la vingt-septième du mois de ramadan, nuit de la 'descente' du Livre de la communauté musulmane, . . . la nuit des enfants," when children play in the streets all night while listening to the *muezzin* read the sacred text, the *Coran* (22). It is also the night when angels descend into the world (22). This "sacred night" of angels flying about, of the rhythmic poetry of the *Coran*, and of children at play, from which the novel draws its title,<sup>26</sup> alludes to Zahra's own narrative play with

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<sup>26</sup>The title of this novel, *La Nuit sacrée*, also alludes to Zahra's internal darkness or her ineffable unconscious other--"la nuit"--as "sacred" which the *OED* defines as "[r]egarded with or deserving veneration or respect as of something holy" (2663). In other words, the title symbolizes Zahra's unsayable otherness (*la nuit*) which is "regarded with respect" (*sacrée*) in this text to the extent that this novel never attempts to define it.

signifiers as a "sacred," regenerative process of opening up to the mysterious internal and external other.

While Zahra's storytelling becomes a way to her own psychological salvation, her narrative act also proves to be equally sacred and ethical in a more social context. The narrator remembers that once she started to write and to tell stories in prison, she imagined that her voice was free, "err[ant] dans les nuages," "se disant," "venant d'ailleurs, traversant d'autres montagnes" (183-84). However, she then concludes, "[m]a voix était libre. Moi, je restais prisonnière" (184). Whereas her imagination is free to run wild during her moments of narration, Zahra's body, nevertheless, remains incarcerated not only in reality but metaphorically as well. In other words, despite liberating her voice as a female other through the practice of self-narration, Zahra still lives imprisoned in an Arabic patriarchal society. Yet, Zahra's function as the prison's "écrivain public" allows her to begin to challenge such a society to the extent that she voices not just her own female difference but also that of her fellow women inmates. Indeed, she reads and/or writes letters and newspapers for the other women prisoners (176), who due to their so-called "lesser" sex, were kept illiterate in a male-dominated culture. As their official writer and reader, Zahra helps these women attain both access to the outside world and a

certain freedom of expression normally not granted to them in such a sexist, repressive society.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in order to write for them, Zahra practices the writing of otherness insofar as she briefly identifies with the women, that is, steals/fries (*vole*) into their alterity. Indeed, Robert Elbaz's description of the *écrivain public* as presented in Ben Jelloun's novels echoes the depiction of writing difference as offered by Cixous. Elbaz states that "[l]'écrivain public doit se vider pour épouser la cause de l'Autre, vivre la vie de l'Autre en quelque sorte" (95).

The protagonist enjoys her otherness not only while writing and reading for the inmates, but also during her nightly storytelling sessions in jail. The narrator relates,

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<sup>27</sup>My reading of this text as critical of Islamic women's social standing in the Arab world is one that is based on Ben Jelloun's own comments in interviews. As I cited in the opening page of this chapter, in one interview, Ben Jelloun explains his writings as follows: "[j]'ai l'impression que le sujet est toujours la femme. J'ai commencé par dénoncer la manière dont elle est exploitée, humiliée jusque dans *L'Enfant de sable* et *La Nuit sacrée* où c'était très visible" ("Tahar Ben Jelloun, Deux cultures, une littérature" 111). He then goes on to say, "aujourd'hui, en tout cas au Maroc . . . la loi ne lui donne pas [à la femme] occasion d'être respectée" (111). Ben Jelloun's point of view is, however, only one of many possible perspectives on this issue. Indeed, many Islamic women embrace their role in Arabic society and, moreover, claim to attain more dignity in a Muslim culture than in the Western world.

[l]es séances de lecture devinrent des soirées où je racontais des histoires. J'inventais au fur et à mesure que j'avais. Le schéma était toujours le même: un amour impossible s'achevant dans le sang. J'avais du plaisir à créer et imaginer des personnages et des situations" (176). [emphasis added]

Moreover, as they accentuate her difference, Zahra's evening oral narrations in prison evoke the female listeners' or narratees' own gratifying sense of difference and even inspire some to create, i.e., to listen to and then to narrate their own otherness. The narrator states that, after listening to her stories,

[c]ertaines venaient me voir à part et me racontaient leur vie. Elles fabulaient beaucoup, elles croyaient que leur vie était un roman, que leur destin était celui d'héroïne méconnue. En prison il ne leur restait que les mots pour vivre. Alors elles en usaient à tort et à travers. Je les écoutais avec patience (176-77).

While aiding other women by serving as their valuable "écrivain public" and storyteller, Zahra dreams of herself as a saviour or a "saint" helping younger women (pro)create.

Elles avaient entendu parler de la Sainte des sables, fille de lumière, dont les mains avaient la grâce et le pouvoir irrémédiable, d'empêcher le malheur et peut-être même d'éloigner définitivement la stérilité du corps des jeunes femmes. Elles venaient là après avoir tout essayé. J'étais leur ultime recours (180).

I contend that the protagonist's mysterious, saintly powers, which cure sterile women, additionally allude to her strange practice of voicing her difference. As the "fille de lumière," that is, as the daughter of symbolic language, Zahra reads, writes and orally narrates her divided

self/text and thus indicates to other Arab women the path towards their liberation from silence, from illiteracy as well as from their second-class social status. As the narrator herself puts it, her writer's "hands" help eradicate "la stérilité du corps des jeunes filles" (180). It appears then that Zahra pictures herself in this dream as a role model, a saviour for future generations of women, who through her own example encourages Arab women to read or to listen to and then to voice their difference and thereby to escape corporeal (or psychic) "sterility."

Thus, it seems that Zahra's writing/narrating is ethical at two levels. On the one hand, her fragmented, poetic, equivocal language represents both dialectic language, alternating between the semiotic and symbolic, and the concomitant self in difference. Such a divided self, as Kristeva claims, in turn, "ethically" disrupts the narcissistic, symbolic identity of "greater being." On the other hand, Zahra's text in difference may literally help others, especially Arab women listeners and readers. Indeed, her narration incites narratees and may also even encourage actual women readers/listeners of *La Nuit* to embrace and then to voice their own difference as well as to respect others. One may surmise then that Zahra speaks of the internal other and for the external other, in



particular, for what patriarchal society has branded and feminists have celebrated as the "female other."

### Textual Otherness as Cultural Otherness

Although written in French, *La Nuit* is a decidedly North African text. Ben Jelloun's novel inscribes the North African tradition of oral narration to the extent that the narrator even tells her story in the classic oral forum of the Maghreb, the town circle. As previously mentioned, the narrator also often interrupts her story with references to her narratees as well as to her implied readers--such as "Amis du Bien!"--which are a characteristic and integral part of the North African oral storytelling tradition. It appears then that *La Nuit* helps support Elbaz's claim that "la relation essentielle entre l'oralité et l'écriture [...] gère toute la production littéraire du Maghreb" (10).

Moreover, Thérèse Michel-Mansour's examination of the typical Arabic forms of address found in oral narrations that Ben Jelloun translates into French as "Ô mes amis!", "Ô mes compagnons!", "Amis du Bien!" evinces yet another aspect of North African art. Michel-Mansour points out that in Arabic these "formules d'adresse" which signify "l'amitié" between the narrator and listeners also connote what their

friendship is based on--"vérité et sincérité" (149)--which the French translations completely omit.

Donc nous révélons ici les sèmes "vérité" et "sincérité" comme étant la base de la relation entre le conteur et son assistance. . . . [Les auditeurs] lui sont fidèles et seront capables après lui de reprendre le récit et le répandre dans d'autres cercles d'assistance jusqu'à l'infini. Ce principe garantit la survie du conte, sa perpétuation. Ceci d'une part, d'autre part l'on ne peut que considérer ici l'analogie entre les "compagnons du conteur" et les "Compagnons du Prophète" (149).

Thus, the "truth" and "sincerity" that binds the narrator and his public in the oral tradition recalls the relationship between the Islamic prophet Mohammed and his companions. Indeed, like the Prophet, the North African storyteller always prefaces his story with the claim that it is "truthful." The oral narrator, as Michel-Mansour goes on to explain, "possède un écrit 'savant', même 'saint'. Il jouit d'une 'relation sacrée' avec son assistance puisque c'est un homme qui leur livre la 'parole' . . . c'est-à-dire la parole 'sincère' et 'véritable' (150). It seems then that Zahra's forms of address to the listeners as well as her opening line in the novel--"Ce qui importe c'est la vérité" (5)--allude, in a rather oblique manner, to the saintly text, the *Coran*, which, according to Michel-Mansour, is always either directly or indirectly present in North African texts. *La Nuit*, however, also includes more obvious references to the *Coran* as Zahra and her father listen to

the *muezzin* read the saintly text over the loudspeaker (22) and when the Consul and Zahra discuss religion and even cite the *Coran* (79).

In addition to Islam, Arabic words, names, poetry and sayings appearing throughout Ben Jelloun's novel further qualify this text as North African. As Michel-Mansour claims, North African texts written in French are built upon "l'Islam et la langue arabe [qui sont les] deux ossatures particulièrement maghrébines" (170). Scattered throughout the text, Arabic words appear without a translation in French: "l'immense haïk blanc qui lui servait de djeballa" (16), "ce muezzin" (22), "son superbe bournous" (37), "les deux djnouns" (65), "l'agence de la médina" (83), "un peu comme Al Hallaj" (83), etc. Indeed, the North African oral tradition along with the presence of Arabic words and culture in *La Nuit* symbolize the Arab or colonized subversive presence in the French or colonizer's language and culture. Describing Ben Jelloun's novels, Elbaz states, "[q]uand on s'y attend le moins, des signes de la Langue Première, première mais absente, viennent bousculer ceux de la langue de l'Autre, la langue du colonisateur" (12). Ben Jelloun even acknowledges the revolutionary aspect of his writing in French when he explains why he writes in French. "[F]aire ce que les Français ont fait chez nous: ils sont

venus s'installer au Maghreb, et moi je m'installais dans leur langue" ("Tahar Ben Jelloun, Deux cultures, une littérature" 108).

The Arabic words in Ben Jelloun's novel, moreover, present a challenge to the non-Arabic, francophone reader who characterizes the majority of the actual readers of this text. Such a reader must attempt to understand the Arabic words through context or rather accept his or her inability to comprehend or to appropriate the word into French language and culture. These foreign, Arabic words thus become textual and cultural *strangers* in this French novel insofar as they disrupt and even perhaps frustrate the non-Arabic-speaker's comprehension of the text. In so doing, the Arabic words instigate the Western reader to open up to an unknowable (because not translated or even untranslatable) textual and cultural other.

In fact, towards the beginning, this novel thematizes such an approach to textual strangeness or alterity. The audiences of the once great popular minstrel Bouchaïb serve as a *mise-en-abyme* for the implied readers of Zahra's story insofar as both audiences must welcome cultural otherness. While in the circle in Marrakesh, Zahra recalls how Bouchaïb's past audiences always reacted positively to his integration of foreign words into his story. "Il truffait

souvent son récit de mots d'une langue inconnue. Il le faisait tellement bien que les gens comprenaient ce qu'il voulait dire. Ils riaient aussi" (10). Like Bouchaïb's listeners, the audience of this novel must remain open to the many strange, Arabic words used throughout this text, not attempting to define them but simply to accept, perhaps understand, and even enjoy them. It seems then that Ben Jelloun is indirectly calling for an openness to and an appreciation of not only the semiotic otherness of language but also of the strange, foreign language or culture included in his novel. In other words, *La Nuit* displays an ethical potential to the extent that it might incite the non-Arabic-speaking reader to embrace Arabic cultural difference without having to define or neutralize it into French sameness.

Surprisingly, the fairly extensive scholarship that I have read on *La Nuit*<sup>28</sup> does not address this novel's ethical

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<sup>28</sup>The critical works that I have read include Marc Gontard's *Le Moi étrange: Littérature marocaine de langue française*, Robert Elbaz's *Tahar Ben Jelloun ou l'inassouvissement du désir narratif*, Mansour M'Henri's *Tahar Ben Jelloun Stratégies d'écriture*, Charles Bonn et Jean-Louis Joubert's *Poétiques croisées du Maghreb*, Thérèse Michel-Monsour's *La Portée esthétique du signe dans le texte maghrébin*, Lahsen Mouzouni's *Le Roman marocain de langue française*, Bengt Novén's *Les Mots et le corps: Étude des procès d'écriture dans l'oeuvre de Tahar Ben Jelloun*, and Rachida Boustia's "Inscription du longue du corps à travers les béances d'une écriture."

effects on the Western reader as concerns cultural otherness. I contend, however, that the Arabic presence in *La Nuit* is not just a means to undermine the colonizing dynamics of the French language on the colonized Arab, as most critics emphasize, but also a way to open up the French or Western novel and its reader to cultural difference. Alternating between, on the one hand, French linguistic and narrative sameness and, on the other hand, Arabic linguistic and narrative otherness, Ben Jelloun's text then is a novel in cultural difference.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Ben Jelloun sees himself along with other Arab writers in French as mediators between French and Arabic cultures. In an interview, he states,

Je pense que nous sommes arrivés maintenant à une étape très importante: nous sommes parvenus à nous imposer comme des médiateurs. Je sais que cela ne plaît pas aux fanatiques mais je crois au dialogue et à l'échange. Andrée (Chedid), comme moi ou comme d'autres écrivains arabes qui écrivons en français, nous facilitons

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<sup>29</sup>Yet another culture to which this novel points, albeit in a more subtle manner, is that of the Berbers living in Morocco. Early on in the text, a Berber woman's narration reminds us of the Berber presence in the Maghreb. However, the beginning of her story alludes to the dwindling presence of the Berber language and culture when she depicts herself as an ancient, unopen book. "[J]e viens d'une saison hors du temps, consignée dans un livre, je suis ce livre jamais ouvert, jamais lu, écrit par les ancêtres" (17). One could surmise that the Berber woman's self-presentation as a closed, unread book intimates the gradual loss of the Berber culture in North African nations as a result of these nations' post-revolutionary arabisation process that represses not just French, the colonizer's language, but Berber languages as well.

l'accès de notre univers et de celui de nos parents à l'Occident...(Les cahiers de l'Orient, n.2, 1986, 173)

Moreover, in the postscript of an earlier collection of poems, *Cicatrices du soleil*, Ben Jelloun stresses his ability as a writer to emphasize "la différence qui me rapproche de tous ceux qui ne sont pas moi" (191). One of the narrator's self-depictions in *La Nuit*, furthermore, alludes to Ben Jelloun's intermediary role as a North African writer in French, coming and going between two cultures. Zahra compares her double life in jail, as a member of the prison's administrative staff (as the "écrivain public") and as a prisoner, to a life split between two languages. "J'allais et venais entre les deux camps comme si j'étais dans deux langues" (176). Indeed, while "envied" (176) and praised by many, Zahra's and Tahar Ben Jelloun's in-between status is also always "feared by others" (176). Thematizing and practicing various means that emphasize or incite the appreciation of differences, *La Nuit*, it appears, calls for the need to recognize and respect, rather than fear and suppress, the other, whether it is the unconscious other, the sexual other or the cultural other.

CHAPTER 4  
FACING THE OTHER IN SYLVIE GERMAIN'S *OPÉRA MUET*

Acclaimed for her highly metaphorical style and her mythical imagination, Sylvie Germain is well on her way to becoming an esteemed writer. Her first novel *Le Livre des nuits* won seven literary prizes in 1985 and, in 1989, she received the distinguished Prix Fémina for her third novel *Jours de colère*. A prolific writer, Germain has already written ten novels, one collection of short stories, and a compilation of poetic essays on paintings. She received her doctorate in philosophy from the Sorbonne and taught philosophy for several years at the French School in Prague. Deeply influenced by Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical writings and by her personal interest in religion, Germain explains that her doctoral thesis was

un travail axé essentiellement sur la dimension éthique qui s'impose dès qu'on rencontre l'autre, l'autre comme Visage, au sens où le philosophe Emmanuel Lévinas a défini ce terme. Il s'agissait donc d'un travail influencé par l'oeuvre de Lévinas, mais aussi marqué par une interrogation liée au christianisme (Sylvie Germain 9).

Levinas's philosophy as well as religious themes drawn from the *Old* and *New Testaments* pervade Germain's fiction,



especially her novel *Opéra muet*, published in 1989. Indeed, insofar as this novel traces the protagonist's varying reactions to *faces*, Germain, once again, focuses on the Levinasian notion of "l'autre comme Visage" wherein the *face* refers to the other's strangeness and God-like ineffability. The protagonist of *Opéra muet*, Gabriel, struggles with the task of naming or defining both the external and internal others portrayed in the novel. Different ways of approaching the "other" are highlighted. They include (1) narcissistic incorporation and therefore neutralization of alterity; (2) ethical opening to and respect for the other; and (3) illusory reunification with otherness leading to psychosis. *Opéra muet* is a meditation on "la dimension éthique," as Levinas describes it, as well as on the dangers inherent in Gabriel's encounters with both external and internal others.

My chapter is divided into four parts. The first section examines the protagonist's narcissism, which is enhanced through his identifications with a building's mural. In the second, I discuss Gabriel's melancholia which renders him reticent and incommunicative towards others. The third segment focuses on how the protagonist's face to face encounters with external others represent a germinating ethical stance. In the fourth section, I analyze the

depiction of Gabriel's creative work as an ambivalent activity. An opening up to otherness, it is, at times, ethical, at times, deadly. The final segment addresses narrative structures which render Germain's text a means through which to acknowledge the other within and without.

Narcissistic (In)Difference or *l'Être en Pierre*

The sole window in Gabriel's small Parisian studio apartment faces a tall, dilapidated building with a full-scale mural advertisement for Dr. Pierre's toothpaste. During the fifteen years that he has lived in the shadow of this fresco, Gabriel becomes attached to Dr. Pierre's stoic face and eventually identifies with it: "[i]l prenait exemple sur le placide Docteur Pierre au vague sourire imperturbable, au doux regard étale qui ne se fixait sur rien" (42-43). It is, especially, the expression of "rigoureuse indifférence" (43) on Dr. Pierre's enormous face that entrances the protagonist. The omniscient narrator dwells in detail on Dr. Pierre's face which

recouvrait la majeure partie du mur. Il se présentait de trois quarts avec cet air lointain et un peu grave dont se parent les portraits d'ancêtres accrochés le long des corridors des manoirs de famille. Sa face mince était enchassée entre le haut col de son habit et les boucles noires des cheveux et des favoris qui descendaient jusqu'au menton. Ses yeux sombres avaient pris le regard du temps. Un regard plein de douceur, légèrement absent, comme en allé. Un imperceptible sourire affinait sa bouche pareille à celle d'une

femme. Tout en lui exprimait le calme, la pudeur et la sérénité, du moins le semblait-il, car en vérité il s'était fait un art de ne rien exprimer (19-20).

Gabriel is both captivated and comforted by Dr. Pierre's impassivity insofar as this image reflects his own dearth of feelings. "Il vivait en miroir d'un immense visage muet d'une apaisante indifférence. Il ne voulait rien d'autre" (19). A mirror image of himself, the face becomes, in Gabriel's eyes, "son compagnon, son confident muet" and even "un ange gardien à sa mesure et à sa ressemblance" (18). Given that the protagonist's name alludes to the biblical archangel Gabriel, the depiction of the mural image as an "ange" further underscores the protagonist's self-projection onto this painted face.

Looking at the mural consoles Gabriel, much like Roland Barthes's notion of reading for pleasure where one reads to feel "confortable" and "jouir[r] de la consistance de son moi" (Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* 25-26). As a result, when he realizes that he is about to lose his reassuring, narcissistic object of art as he watches construction workers slowly destroy the building and its mural, the protagonist frantically photographs it: "[c]lic-clic-clic... il avalait l'image mutilée. Son appareil lui était oeil autant que bouche" (44). The metonymic shift from camera to eye and to mouth in this quote underscores how photography

enables the protagonist to incorporate the other into the self-same.

Indeed, Gabriel enjoys focusing on images in general as well as on light and reflections, that is, on all that relates to the visual, the seeming or the superficial.

[I]l avait perdu le goût des formes et des couleurs et il avait trouvé celui de la lumière et des reflets, des jeux éblouissants de transparences, de chatolements et de réverbations. Le monde avait perdu pour lui toute épaisseur, la vie ne portait plus le poids de la chair; il avait mis le monde plat, réduit le mouvement de la vie à celui, si ténu, des lueurs et moires impondérables (52).

Accordingly, Gabriel spends most of the day dealing with mundane images and lights as he professionally photographs strangers' weddings and baptisms for a living. Gabriel performs his job "comme un automate" (*Opéra muet* 44), limiting his work to "la fabrication de mornes duplicata" (Germain, Sylvie Germain 8). He does not engage in a more artistic approach or, as Germain refers to it, with the mysterious adventure of photography (Sylvie Germain 8), nor is he interested in relations with real, flesh-and-blood others--"le poids de la chair" (*Opéra muet* 52). Instead, Gabriel remains engrossed by and literally exists through their images.

However, the protagonist depends mainly on the mural for his psychic stability. Indeed, the building is humanized insofar as it bears a painted face with a name,

Dr. *Pierre*, which suggests the psychic solidity sought by Gabriel. Similar to the fortress in *Un Balcon en forêt*, Germain's edifice is a metaphor for the process of self-fortification. And, like the womb-tomb structure in Gracq's novel, the building's exterior in Germain's text covers over a mysterious, dark room suggestive of a maternal space. In fact, it houses a Turkish bath for women, an enclosed, prohibited space wherein, as Gabriel imagines it, female bodies languish enveloped in steam and floating in pools of water.

L'établissement de bains turcs renfermait dans ses murs le rêve par excellence--la beauté de la chair. Alcôves fraîches où, sur des tables rondes, fument des verres de thé aux senteurs de menthe, tandis que sur leurs couches des femmes se délassent en écoutant le très doux ruissellement de fontaines mises là à jaillir et jaser pour leur seul plaisir. Hammam aux mosaïques bleues et blanches empli de vapeurs chaudes, de murmures et de souffles, et d'odeurs de corps. Femmes assises dans les étuves sur des gradins de bois, dans des brumes bleuâtres aux parfums balsamiques, ainsi que des statues de glaise hésitant entre l'absence et la présence. Chevelures ruisselantes tordues sous des jets d'eau, visages laqués de sueur, membres humides aux gestes lents, inachevés, et mol abandon des corps à la chaleur, au songe et au repos (24-25).

Depictions of softness, of movement and of the ephemeral inside the building contrast with the rigidity (*pierre*) and static quality of the external structure. The combination of female bodies with images and sounds of water within this womb-like *hammam*, which is phonetically evocative of the French word *maman*, appears to symbolize Gabriel's

internalized other or rather (m)other.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the comparison of women's bodies to "des statues de glaise hésitant entre l'absence et la présence" alludes to what Kristeva refers to as the ungraspable "mère archaïque" (*Soleil noir* 157) or maternal Thing, typically encrypted within the negative narcissist or melancholic. Indeed, the narrator's earlier description of Dr. Pierre's, and therefore Gabriel's, "bouche pareille à celle d'une femme" (20) and of his "art de ne rien exprimer" serve as figurative and literal allusions, respectively, to the protagonist's introjection of the (m)other.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the *hammam* contains female rather than male bodies and, in so doing, metaphorizes, specifically, what Cixous would call Gabriel's *autre bisexualité* and what I refer to as the self in difference. Gabriel's imagined bath scenes inside the building, which focus on "le rêve par excellence--la beauté de la chair," "[les] vapeurs chaudes, [les] murmures et [les] souffles, et [les] odeurs de corps", "[les] parfums," as well as on a variety of moist body parts, also allude to

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<sup>2</sup>As I stated in Chapter 2, I conflate *other* and *mother* into (m)other as a way to refer to the Kristevan notion that the ineffable sense of internal otherness "prend pour l'imaginaire la consistance d'une mère archaïque," i.e., the maternal Thing (*Soleil noir* 157).

<sup>3</sup>The following section of this chapter elaborates on the protagonist's melancholic state and on his concomitant silence.

his desire or *jouissance* that, along with his sense of semiotic otherness, remains veiled behind his narcissistic facade. In fact, Gabriel points to his internalized semiotic or corporeal (m)other and his subsequent lack of desire when he perceives the painted face, that is, himself, as "un idiot de vigie posté en garde d'une glaisière de corps, un prince eunuque veillant sur un harem de femmes nues, d'odeurs et de chuchotements" (26-27). Always suppressing his corporeal sense of difference or *autre bisexualité*--"un harem de femmes nues"--and thus never experiencing *jouissance*, Gabriel becomes akin to a eunuch. The repeated references to Gabriel as an "homme minime" throughout the text, moreover, intimate his androgyny. It seems then that just as the walls of the building, including the one bearing Dr. Pierre's face, hide the Turkish bath within, the protagonist's illusory perception of an indifferent, unified self represses his maternal, semiotic other or Thing.

Not only does the mural facilitate his suppression of his sense of internal otherness, but it also defends Gabriel from external others; that is, it precludes him from interacting with others, thereby functioning as

l'austère gardien qui défendait sa solitude, l'ange courtois qui veillait sur sa vie d'homme minime. Car il était un homme minime, Gabriel, et il tenait à le rester. Vivre comme en cachette au coeur de la grande

ville, terré dans son logement où la lumière du jour ne parvenait que peu, à l'abri d'un haut mur dressé tel un rempart entre les hommes et lui, entre le ciel et lui, entre la vie et lui, cela lui convenait (18).

In the comforting shadow of his self-reflecting mural, Gabriel leads a life of solitude and of indifference towards others which, according to Levinas, delineates the unethical state of self-absorption (Levinas, *Entre nous* 225). Levinas further claims that the "art-image," such as that of the Dr. Pierre mural, often numbs the audience into a dangerous inertia. "L'image marque une emprise sur nous, plutôt que notre initiative: une passivité foncière" ("La Réalité et son ombre" 774). For Levinas, images that console viewers incite them to focus on the self or, as Levinas calls it, encourage "our interest in being, our *inter-est*, as a being-in-the-world attached to property and appropriating what is other than itself to itself" ("Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 29). Consequently, certain art-images may potentially disengage the viewers from their sense of responsibility for the human other. As Sean Hand explains Levinas's controversial perspective on art, artistic "images are interesting in the literal sense (*inter-esse*) without being useful. . . . The disengagement this encourages means that art is an evasion of responsibility, since it offers consolation rather than a challenge" (*The Levinas Reader* 129). To the extent that the mural comforts the protagonist



and supports his narcissistic aggrandizement, the fresco contributes to his closed and therefore unethical existence.

Moreover, the graffiti directly beneath the mural further fosters Gabriel's hermit-like life inasmuch as the writings on the wall evidence humans infected with indifference and/or hatred and resentment.

Gabriel jetait chaque jour un coup d'oeil sur cette ardoise collective aux textes anonymes, de la même façon qu'il parcourait du regard les grands titres des journaux affichés aux devantures des kiosques. Et il lui semblait que les passants, en majorité, étaient tout aussi gangrenés par la banalité, la haine et le ressentiment, que l'ensemble du monde et que les puissants qui tiraient tour à tour les ficelles de l'histoire (21).

Furthermore, discontinuous and interlacing stains of dog urine underline the graffiti along the wall. The dog markings, in fact, correspond to the human scribbings on the wall.

Encore plus bas, à hauteur de chien, des traînées d'urine s'étagaient en frises discontinues qui s'enlaçaient les uns aux autres. C'était un langage fruste, lapidaire, qui soulignait avec énergie celui des gribouilleurs; les hommes s'interpellaient sans même se rencontrer, le plus souvent en s'insultant, et les chiens pissaient sur les traces les uns des autres. Un même impétueux désir de se colleter avec son semblable, comme ça, pour le plaisir (22).

Just as dogs mark out their territory with urination, the graffiti writers delineate their self-enclosed identities through anonymous threats and attacks against the other. Never physically encountering the other face to face, they remain closed to and even repudiate the external other, the

stranger. Unlike the "proximity" advocated by Levinas as the necessary means to ethical relations,<sup>4</sup> such desolate, hateful cries scrawled on a city wall underscore humans' self-absorption and distance from one another as they write/speak out without reading/listening to each other. Otherwise stated, such graffiti, as Gabriel sees it, evidences a social entrenchment in narcissism which, in turn, brings about a lack of communication.

Not only does the mural help inhibit the protagonist's sense of internal otherness as well as discourage any relations with others, but it also thwarts his contemplation of the mysterious Other or God. Indeed, the painted wall becomes "tel un rempart . . . entre le ciel et lui" (18). In fact, Dr. Pierre's pained expression recalls that of Catholic pictorials or statuaries depicting Christ's Passion. As the narrator remarks, Dr. Pierre's face, with beading sweat and tears, "s'imposait alors avec majesté, comme la face sacrée d'une icône" (*Opéra muet* 23). Germain alleges in an interview that such pictorials "can lead to

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<sup>4</sup>Levinas writes, [l]a proximité d'Autrui, la proximité du prochain, est dans l'être un moment inéluctable de la révélation, d'une présence absolue (c'est-à-dire dégagée de toute relation) qui s'exprime. Son épiphanie même consiste à nous solliciter par sa misère dans le visage de l'Étranger, de la veuve ou de l'orphelin (*Totalité et infini* 76).

faith but at the same time they can eclipse faith" ("Sylvie Germain - Interview" 12). Given the protagonist's use of the mural's image as a means to enhance his unethical self-absorption, the iconic painting, at this point in the novel, appears to cast a shadow on Gabriel's faith in the Other.

Nevertheless, Gabriel's isolated and faithless existence also includes brief moments of pleasure or "des plus petits plaisirs et des très minuscules joies" (29) such as the comforts of his blanket around his body as well as of his daily showers and hot chocolate. Deprived of any human touch or warmth, Gabriel is perpetually cold and relies upon these "consolation[s] aussi légère[s] que fugace[s]" (28).

Il ne prenait ses douches que très chaudes, en été comme en hiver. C'était là, après l'épaisse couverture dont il s'emmitonnait au saut du lit, la deuxième phase du lent processus de réchauffement qu'il mettait en oeuvre chaque matin pour tenter de chasser la sensation de froid ancrée en lui. Ensuite il passait dans la cuisine où il se préparait un chocolat chaud (28).

In addition to the pacifying view of the mural, the protagonist's daily blanket, shower, and hot chocolate constitute "les objets usuels, les nourritures, le monde même que nous habitons" that help form, as Levinas argues, an "egoist self" (*Totalité et infini* 28). In fact, it is this "egoism" that permits Gabriel to individuate and, subsequently, to eschew the need to unite with the human other into an illusory totality, which would entail the

narcissistic appropriation of the latter into the self-same. Thus, in spite of his apparent exclusive preoccupation with himself, evident in the beginning of the novel, the protagonist also shows signs that he is on the path to an ethical becoming. It follows then that Gabriel's solitude is both negative and positive. As Levinas writes, "[l]e sujet est seul, parce qu'il est un. Il faut une solitude pour qu'il y ait liberté du commencement, maîtrise de l'existant sur l'exister, c'est-à-dire, en somme, pour qu'il y ait existant. La solitude n'est donc pas seulement un désespoir et un abandon, mais aussi une virilité et une fierté et une souveraineté" (*Le Temps et l'autre* 35).

#### Melancholic (In)Difference or the Hidden Face of Narcissus

As he witnesses the dismantling of the building, his object of self-reflection, Gabriel starts to lose his apparent stoicism. The protagonist suddenly perceives Dr. Pierre, and therefore himself, in a new light. For example, the thin streams of condensation along Dr. Pierre's face, caused by the steam rising up out of the Turkish bath through the small windows that puncture the face on the mural, represent, for Gabriel, his own sweat and tears of pain.<sup>5</sup> In other words, this image of suffering

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<sup>5</sup>By identifying with Dr. Pierre's punctured face and apparent suffering which recalls Christ's Passion at the

emblematicizes, the protagonist now understands, his own distress as he silently represses his *jouissance* or his "lancinante rumeur du désir."

C'est que les larmes qui sourdaient de ce rêve étaient les siennes--purifiées, magnifiées. Toutes les larmes enlisées dans son coeur, et qu'il n'avait pas su verser. C'est qu'il avait déposé derrière cette face muette la lancinante rumeur du désir que son corps et son sang d'homme minime ne pouvaient plus depuis longtemps contenir et endurer (27-28).

According to Kristeva, the painful stifling of one's desire for a human other is often symptomatic of the melancholic who instead remains engrossed with the internalized, indescribable semiotic other or maternal Thing (*Soleil noir* 23). Indeed, the narrator's depictions of Dr. Pierre's melancholic airs circuitously describe Gabriel's own heightened depression. "Les yeux du Docteur Pierre étaient ainsi devenus vairons, et son regard en paraissait encore plus évasif, et son sourire plus mélancolique" (23). Both Dr. Pierre and the protagonist are compared to Gérard de Nerval's "prince déjà à moitié dépossédé de son royaume" (27) in *El Desdichado*, a comparison which is supported by further references to the incandescent sky of "'un matin sans lumière'" (30) and of "'un jour morne'" (39) reminiscent of Nerval's *soleil noir*. As we have shown in

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Cross, the protagonist's pain already anticipates his experience of redemption later in the novel.

our study of Gracq's novel, *soleil noir* is Kristeva's metaphor for the depressed individual's painfully internalized sense of otherness.

Thus, no longer living with the building's reassuring reflection, Gabriel falls into a dangerous state of depression. Indeed, the destruction of his narcissistic support--the mural--and his concomitant heightened melancholia reveals a suffering self in difference underneath the protagonist's fictitious image of a stable self. As Kristeva claims, "la dépression est le visage caché de Narcisse, celui qui va l'emporter dans la mort, mais qu'il ignore alors qu'il s'admire dans un mirage" (*Soleil noir* 15).

The protagonist was not always melancholic, however. Gabriel repeatedly recollects vague memories of photographing the ocean depths: "[p]endant des années il avait hanté le silence de la nuit océane pour en photographier la faune, la flore et les géographies secrètes" (36). In light of the phonetic similarity between *mer* and *mère* in French, his past hobby of photographing secrets of the *mer/mère* suggests artistic attempts to recapture or to symbolize the lost (m)other through images and, in so doing, to sublimate his sadness. In other words, his photographs functioned as signifiers insofar as they

signified his feelings of otherness. Such a substitution represents a denial of the loss of the maternal Thing<sup>6</sup> which, for Freud and for Kristeva, is the successful process of mourning that deters melancholia.

Yet, one day, as Gabriel recalls, the "mer" (mère) rejected him. "[L]a mer un jour l'avait rejeté, s'était fermée à lui. . . . [S]oudain quelque chose s'était brisé et avait basculé et maintenant c'était lui qui se trouvait hanté par le silence et la nuit aquatiques dont les mystères et les splendeurs s'étaient soudés en bloc d'impossible" (36). Gabriel's illusion of the mer/mère's rejection metaphorizes his inability to represent the internal other which is impervious to signifiers, i.e., irrepresentable. "La mer" rejects not Gabriel but his attempts to represent it and, consequently, the process of mourning is blocked; that is, he no longer inhibits or defends against his sense of otherness with symbolic substitution. From this moment on, Gabriel instead remains painfully riveted to or "haunted" by the "silence" and "aquatic darkness" of the unsayable. Indeed, as Kristeva contends, "il [le déprimé]

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<sup>6</sup>Kristeva writes, "[e]n perdant maman et en m'appuyant sur la dénégation, je la récupère comme signe, image, mot" (Soleil noir 74). Also refer to my discussion of Freud's and Kristeva's distinctions between mourning and melancholia in Chapter 1, in the section "Melancholia, Aesthetic Play and the Ethical Self/Text."

renonce à signifier et s'immerge dans le silence de la douleur ou le spasme des larmes qui commémorent les retrouvailles avec la Chose" (*Soleil noir* 53).

Consequently, the protagonist's melancholic refusal to symbolize the (m)other within foments a distrust not only of photography but also of language. Words become slippery, empty and therefore useless signifiers which Gabriel refers to as "lures" and "illusions."

Son regard [celui de Gabriel] se perdait dans le vide, dans le vide des mots. Et son coeur se serrait d'avoir été si ébloui par le leurre des mots, puis trahi à la mesure de cet éblouissement. Enfant, il avait soupçonné la possibilité de ce leurre, la gravité de ce mensonge: que les mots, peut-être ne sont qu'artifice, jeu cruel, illusion. D'emblée il avait éprouvé de la méfiance à leur rencontre (84-85).

Indeed, Gabriel's suspicion of language stems from his childhood tendency to perceive language as "dead" or meaningless.<sup>7</sup> He would often ask himself with regard to words, "étaient-ils tous réels, avaient-ils tous vraiment un sens, et surtout, étaient-ils durables?" (85). During the dismantling of the building, Gabriel notes the workers' "foreign" language: "Les voix des ouvriers [...] s'interpellaient dans une langue étrangère" (16). And again, "ils parlaient avec entrain dans une langue étrangère. Peut-être parlaient-ils de la lente mise à mort

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<sup>7</sup>Kristeva expounds on the melancholic's "effondrement spectaculaire du sens" on pages 64 and 65 in *Soleil noir*.



du Docteur Pierre, peut-être avaient-ils remarqué que ce bâtiment n'était pas comme les autres, qu'il abritait un esprit, un djinn aussi mélancolique que puissant" (49). The protagonist's sensitivity to "foreign" languages points to his nascent melancholic loss of meaning in language.

Kristeva claims that "le dire du dépressif est pour lui comme une peau étrangère: le mélancolique est un étranger dans sa langue maternelle. Il a perdu le sens--la valeur--de sa langue maternelle, faute de perdre sa mère. La langue morte qu'il parle et qui annonce son suicide cache une chose enterrée vivante. Mais celle-ci, il ne la traduira pas pour ne pas la trahir" (*Soleil noir* 64).

Indeed, rather than focus on meaningful language, Gabriel starts to pay attention to inarticulate noises that convey his pain, like a bellowing cry. For instance, in bed, the protagonist suffers while listening to the disquieting whistle of the wind as it blows through the remaining ruins of the edifice.

Pendant la nuit, le vent qui s'engouffrait dans le local vide rendit au lieu parole et souffle. Parole affolée de silence et de perte, parole à cru, privée de mots, d'images et de syntaxe. Parole brute qui ne proférait plus que la violence et la douleur d'un verbe nu parole réduite à la stridence du souffle, et souffle devenu cri, plainte, sanglot. . . . Gabriel sentait dans sa poitrine son propre souffle se traîner avec effort et chuintements (44-45).

These corporeal sounds--"souffle," "cri, plainte, sanglot," "chuintements"--, in fact, allude to Gabriel's distressful semiotic markings which are disturbing precisely because they remain disconnected from symbolic articulation, i.e., from language. As Kristeva writes, "[c]ette intériorité douloureuse [est] faite de marques sémiotiques mais pas de signes" (*Soleil noir* 74).<sup>8</sup>

Increasingly becoming a foreigner/stranger (*étranger*) in his own language and thus concentrating on sounds rather than on words, Gabriel undergoes the typical melancholic

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<sup>8</sup>Moreover, while suffering in silence, heretofore suppressed images of the past return to haunt Gabriel. Recurrent traumatic memories of his grandmother's death and of his lover's (Agathe's) abandonment merge with Gabriel's illusion of the *mer/mère's* rejection. Specifically, the recent resurgence of his asthma, due to the increased dust from the building's ruins, reminds him of these past, painful experiences during which he also suffered asthma attacks. One such attack

avait eu lieu peu de temps après la mort de sa grand-mère, alors qu'il était en plongée. D'un coup son souffle s'était bloqué, quelque chose en lui s'était cabré comme un animal pris de frayeur. Ce fut de la sorte que la mer l'avait rejeté, exilé et renié. La mer, et puis Agathe. L'une avait achevé l'exil inauguré par l'autre (45-46).

As Kristeva posits, the melancholic's inability to substitute the lost maternal Thing with signifiers allows for similar distressful memories of loss to resurface. Such images of the past, Kristeva alleges, are not "une élaboration symbolique de la perte car les signes sont inaptes à capter les inscriptions primaires intrapsychiques de la perte et de la liquider par cette élaboration même: au contraire, ils ressassent, impuissants" (*Soleil noir* 58). Consequently, Gabriel's memories further aggravate his melancholic pain vis-à-vis the irrepresentability of his internal otherness.

symptoms that highlight language's powerlessness vis-à-vis the internal, disquieting, because ineffable, other--"un djinn aussi mélancolique que puissant." Unable to capture his otherness with the "leurre" of either words or photographs and precluded from identifying with the now disappearing mural, which previously helped him repress his otherness, Gabriel can no longer sustain his satisfying narcissistic illusion of a stable "greater being" (Alcorn 15). Indeed, by remaining indifferent towards the world, never symbolizing his strange feelings of alterity within, Gabriel never neutralizes his otherness into a comforting and even gratifying sameness. As a result, he becomes melancholic and silent, and eventually stops working as a photographer. "[I]l prenait sans cesse plus de dégoût son métier de faiseur d'images-souvenirs" (70). "Gabriel ne se rendit pas à son travail" (88). While evidencing his extreme passivity, Gabriel's inability to use signifiers to inhibit his sense of difference, however, also displays his incipient respect for his internal otherness. Thus, although distressful, Gabriel's worsening melancholy intimates a latent openness to the unconscious other which, in turn, incites his ethical consideration for the external or human other later on in the novel.

Discovering The Other

The night before the building's complete destruction, that is, when the protagonist senses that he is about to lose his narcissistic reinforcement, he photographs it, and, at that moment, finally perceives Dr. Pierre's painted face as other: "à nouveau il le photographia; ce visage en voie de disparition le fascinait plus que jamais. 'Ce n'est à présent plus un portrait, se dit Gabriel, mais un suaire'" (47-48). This face or "death shroud," which recalls Christ's shroud of Turin, as seen through a photographic lens connotes death for Gabriel. "'C'est cela, se répétait Gabriel en archivant par avance l'image condamnée, c'est tout à fait cela, mon vieil ange gardien s'en va, il a fini son temps en ce monde. Voici que son visage s'ouvre comme un tombeau" (48-49). Rather than reinforce his unethical self-absorption, the mural confounds Gabriel with the otherness of its imminent destruction or death. For the protagonist, Dr. Pierre's face is, as Levinas contends, "the other before death, looking through and exposing death" ("Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" 24).

However, it is not only Dr. Pierre's face but also the act of photographing it that contributes to Gabriel's epiphany. Indeed, in this scene, Gabriel unexpectedly acknowledges the strange power of photography as it

highlights Dr. Pierre's death, that is, that the mural "will have been."

Une pensée bizarre lui traversa l'esprit. 'Bientôt, se dit-il, le Docteur Pierre aura été.' Cette petite phrase lui parut saugrenue; il chercha le nom qui qualifiait ce temps de conjugaison. 'Ah oui, le futur antérieur! Drôle de nom, temps insensé!' Puis il se ravisa, et ajouta: 'Mais c'est le temps des photographes...' (49)

It appears then that through the ominous art of photography Gabriel undergoes a sense of wonder vis-à-vis the unknown, an "étonnement" which, according to Germain, subsequently incites "une forme de renaissance au monde" (*Sylvie Germain* 8). Indeed, from this point forward, the protagonist remains open to the mysterious unknown, to the external other's ineffable alterity.

Thus, the mural becomes a book, a religious painting, a shroud of Turin, and a photograph, all of which escape the protagonist's comprehension, his mastery. No longer a reflection of sameness, the Dr. Pierre fresco, as the protagonist now sees it, becomes an indescribable other. "La face n'était plus qu'un ample paysage ouvert à l'infini du ciel et à l'indéfini du vide" (57).<sup>9</sup> Given, as Germain herself admits, Levinas's influence on Germain's work, such a description of the "face" as "l'infini du ciel" clearly

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<sup>9</sup>Gabriel's wonder and acknowledgment of the ineffable when looking at this painted face prefigures his reaction to a real human face, which we will later examine.

echoes Levinas's depiction of the other's face as a God-like presence, "infiniment éloigné . . . [qui] vient d'une dimension de hauteur, dimension de la transcendance où il peut se présenter comme étranger, sans s'opposer à moi, comme obstacle ou ennemi" (*Totalité et infini* 237). Indeed, although "étranger," that is, ungraspable and therefore "ouvert à l'indéfini du vide" (57), Dr. Pierre's (the other's) face is peaceful and non-threatening and, in turn, generates the protagonist's pleasant and tranquil demeanor. "Gabriel se sentait heureux, plein de calme et de sérénité, comme si tout son être s'était enfoui, apaisé sous la neige" (56). As a result, Gabriel's interest in external others or "strangers" increases.

Once the protagonist's edifice-mural, i.e., his defensive wall, which separated him from the rest of the world is demolished, he begins to notice human others living in another building across from his apartment. To the extent that the dust from the building's ruins provoke Gabriel's nightly asthma attacks, he starts to suffer from insomnia. Consequently, to occupy his time, he keeps vigil over "les insomniaques de l'immeuble dressé de l'autre côté du chantier" (65). Every night,

[il] appuyait son front contre la vitre, et regardait. Il regardait ce qui lui était donné à voir. Son ancien cadre avait éclaté, l'image familière et aimée avait disparu--restait le contexte si longtemps caché de

cette image perdue. D'autres immeubles pareils au sien, d'autres individus pareils à lui. Et parmi eux, ces trois noctambules de la maison d'en face" (70).

Gabriel's insomnia and constant focus on three other suffering insomniacs "facing" him, albeit from a distance, illustrate what Levinas refers to in an interview as "an ethics of the other" or, more specifically, as "a vigilant passivity to the call of the other which precedes our interest in being, our *inter-est*" ("Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" 29). Levinas explains, "I have described ethical responsibility as *insomnia* or *wakefulness* precisely because it is a perpetual duty of vigilance and effort that can never slumber. Ontology as a state of affairs can afford to sleep. But love cannot sleep, can never be peaceful or permanent. Love is the incessant watching over of the other" ("Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" 30). Thus, as the protagonist in Germain's novel watches over his neighbors, he displays a germinating sense of care and responsibility for the other as well as a concomitant *disinterest* in self, a distancing from narcissism: "Restait un profond désarroi. La nudité et l'âpreté de sa solitude parurent soudain palpable à Gabriel, elles se firent crissantes sous ses ongles et ses dents" (80).

Moreover, watching his three neighbors immediately inspires the protagonist's imagination to the extent that he

starts to invent stories about them (65-78). Gabriel even names one "Hublot," after a favorite character in a childhood book, and another one "Aaron," after the biblical high priest who helped Moses lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. Noticing that the third nameless neighbor watches television all night, Gabriel envisages this fellow insomniac as someone living in a perpetual state of anticipation, of waiting.

Quelqu'un là-bas ne parvenait pas à trouver le sommeil, le repos, l'oubli. Quelqu'un tuait le temps assis devant un écran vide, grésillant. Quelqu'un trompait sa peur de la nuit, son ennui, à la clarté d'un faux jour. Quelqu'un attendait, nuit après nuit; attendait sans savoir quoi. Quelqu'un attendait, qui n'avait plus rien ni personne à attendre (67).

Gabriel's illusion of this neighbor's ongoing "attente," in fact, prefigures Gabriel's own subsequent state in the following pages.

Indeed, while scrutinizing the neighbor he calls "Aaron" or "le chiffonnier-magicien" through a pair of binoculars, Gabriel experiences an overwhelming instance of eternity, of a God-like presence in the other. The protagonist becomes entranced by the neighbor's handling of a beautiful carpet imprinted with a stylized drawing of a menorah.

Le chiffonnier-magicien reparut bientôt; il se pencha à nouveau par la fenêtre et se mit à caresser avec douceur le tapis, comme pour en éprouver la texture, et il le tapota encore un peu. Gabriel attendait--et si le vieux, du bout de ses doigts minces couleur de cire,



allait allumer d'un seul coup les sept cierges de la Menorah? (78)

Gabriel then suddenly envisions the biblical image of Aaron, the high priest, lighting the menorah, which signals the coming of the Messiah. It is "une image promise, annoncée par des mots. Par des mots millénaires. Une image au futur. Un futur aussi éternel qu'imminent. Mais lui, d'un coup, face à ce simple tapis, se sentit projeté sur l'extrême rebord du temps, comme si l'éternité était sur le point d'arriver" (79). The protagonist's sense of "eternity" or of infinity while watching his neighbor illustrates the Levinasian notion of the infinite Other's or God's presence in the human other's mysterious face. As Levinas states, "[l]a dimension du divin s'ouvre à partir du visage humain" (*Totalité et infini* 76). Indeed, the neighbor's priestly activity "repandait sur la ville," Gabriel claims, "les cendres d'une mémoire sacrée, à jamais incandescente" (80). In an interview, Germain's depiction of "mémoire sacrée" refers to the ineffability of God. She defines this "mémoire sacrée" as "mystérieuse, immémoriale; celle des origines. C'est là une mémoire qui s'étend aux confins du silence de Dieu" (*Sylvie Germain* 14). Thus, by way of his ongoing insomnia and vigilance over the other, the protagonist acknowledges the shared "immemorial" or unnameable aspect of the o/Other, that is, of the human

other and of God. Unable to define or to comprehend the fellow insomniac's activities, the protagonist appears not only to recognize but also to respect the other's ungraspable difference.

Moreover, the novel conflates the unknowable characteristic of the human other and of God with that of the future,<sup>10</sup> "un futur aussi éternel qu'imminent" (79), thereby highlighting the ethical act of attentively waiting vis-à-vis the o/Other. Rather than trying to remember the immemorial or name the unnameable, Gabriel must patiently wait for a revelation that perhaps may never appear. It seems then that the protagonist's sense of wonder with regard to the irreducible element in the human other, i.e., in his neighbor, in the above scene, displays, once again, what Germain calls a rejuvenating "étonnement" which, she further elaborates, involves both "patience" and "humilité" (Sylvie Germain 11). Thus, it appears that Aaron, as the protagonist correspondingly refers to his neighbor, incites Gabriel's precipitous messianic hope and ethical "attente."

Gabriel attendait que s'allument les mèches, que s'élancent les flammes. Il attendait, le coeur battant,

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<sup>10</sup>In *Le Temps et l'autre*, Levinas contends that since the future cannot be determined in the present, the future is then also the other. "[L]'avenir, c'est ce qui n'est pas saisi, ce qui tombe sur nous et s'empare de nous. L'avenir, c'est l'autre. La relation avec l'avenir, c'est la relation même avec l'autre" (64).

un miracle de flammes blanches. Il attendait, le coeur serré, que se retourne la nuit, qu'éclate le ciel et se craque la terre sous l'étreinte du froid, sous la poussée des flammes. Le glacial et le brûlant s'étaient confondus en une unique sensation; il éprouvait dans sa chair, dans sa gorge et son coeur, une sensation lumineuse et acide (79-80).

Furthermore, Gabriel's contradictory sensations of "le glacial et le brûlant," "lumineuse et acide" in the above quote as well as his subsequent mixed feelings of "la splendeur et l'étrange terreur" (80) illustrate the uncanny or *unheimliche* experience which, as Kristeva posits, the external other's presence often triggers. Indeed, the exciting yet disconcerting experience of the neighbor's unsayable alterity impels Gabriel to discover his own pleasurable yet frightening, i.e., uncanny, sense of a divided self. As Kristeva writes, "l'étranger est là pour lui redonner vie" (*Étrangers* 60).

The protagonist's ensuing relations with others further encourage him to embrace his self in difference. For example, seeking a remedy for his increased asthma, the protagonist meets with Dr. Déodat. Inasmuch as it means "he surrenders to God" in Latin, the name *Déodat* obviously points to the doctor's--the other's--divine-like impenetrability or infinity which Gabriel, in fact, experiences and to which "he surrenders" during his visit. Indeed, the novel underscores the doctor's mysterious

quality insofar as he sits in the dark, "en face de" Gabriel, speaking in a slow muffled voice (92). Moreover, Gabriel momentarily confuses Doctor Déodat with a cat sitting behind the doctor, which Ancient Egyptian culture often associated with God or the Other,<sup>11</sup> thereby heightening, once again, the doctor's enigmatic otherness in Gabriel's eyes. "Il sembla à Gabriel que le chat le fixait de derrière la fenêtre, et que c'était lui qui le questionnait" (92). Immediately after this meeting with Déodat who advises him to go south, to a warmer climate for awhile, Gabriel undergoes a sense of exaltation, of joyous rebirth.

Il allait réinventer en lui le goût de vivre. 'Un miracle! se répétait Gabriel, fou de joie; c'est un vrai miracle que ce Docteur Déodat vient de mettre en mouvement. Il m'a sorti de ma torpeur, il m'a montré la voie à suivre désormais. J'étais bien, à l'ombre de mon mur, mais puisque ce mur n'est plus, il est temps que je cherche un autre lieu où vivre (94).

No longer able to live with the mural as his narcissistic support, he realizes that he is free to search for a new existence. Thus, it is the o/Other, Dr. Déodat, who

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<sup>11</sup>In *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, Jaromir Malek states that the male cat was identified "with the sun-God and the complex of beliefs concerning the sun's night journey through the underworld, so securing it, in religious terms, the highest possible connections" (73). Early in the first millennium BC, Malek explains, "[i]t appears that the linking of the female [cat] with the goddess Bastet started at that time. During the Ptolemaic period (332-30 BC) the cat's popularity reached its peak. It was the most Egyptian of all the animals associated with Egyptian gods" (73).

encourages Gabriel to change his solitary, narcissistic existence and to embrace a new life.

Furthermore, after meeting with the doctor, Gabriel becomes exhilarated by the prospect of traveling to the desert, a space which in the *Old Testament* connotes freedom for the liberated Israelites who were led into the desert by Moses as well as by Aaron's words.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Gabriel's contemplation of a voyage into the desert curiously revives his interest in language.

L'idée du désert s'empara de lui, brusquement. Le mot désert, à peine évoqué, nomma et accrut le désir d'évasion qui pour la première fois s'éveillait en lui. Les mots avaient perdu leur goût de craie et de poussière; les mots venaient de prendre la saveur et l'éclat du sable, de la lumière, du vent. Les mots retrouvaient la magie qu'ils avaient eue autrefois dans la bouche de sa grand-mère" (95).

It appears that the act of uttering the word *desert* heightens the protagonist's desire, for the first time, for adventure, for freedom. Realizing this and that "les mots venaient de prendre la saveur et l'éclat du sable, de la lumière, du vent," Gabriel understands that the practice of narrating stories, as his grandmother used to do, becomes the desert voyage itself. In fact, according to Germain,

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<sup>12</sup>The biblical Aaron served as "the mouthpiece" who helped lead the Hebrews into the desert. As God in the *Old Testament* explains to Moses, Aaron "will do all the speaking to the people for you; he will be the mouthpiece and you will be the god he speaks for" (*Oxford Study Bible*, Exodus 4:16, 65).

the desire to use language creatively, to write or, as Gabriel puts it in the above quote, to find, once again, "la magie" of words becomes akin to traveling through a vast, mysterious space. In an interview, Germain states,

Écrire, c'est s'aventurer à l'infini dans un espace qui relève aussi bien du désert, de la forêt, des marais, du labyrinthe, de la mer; on se fraye un chemin, on sème des mots, des images, on poursuit un but dont on fait on ignore tout. On va, et on est perpétuellement dans l'inachevé, comme lorsqu'on marche vers l'horizon,--l'horizon se déplace à mesure (Sylvie Germain 6).

Thus, writing the self and therefore subjectivity is a process that never reaches closure or "truth." Like Germain, Cixous also poetically refers to the process of writing the divided self as a voyage and, moreover, underscores the corporeal aspect of traveling/writing. Cixous states, "[w]riting is not arriving; most of the time it's not arriving. One must go on foot, with the body. One has to go away, leave the self" (*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* 65).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Like Germain, Cixous also metaphorizes both the enjoyment of the divided subject and the writing of difference as traveling "in a strange and foreign country" (*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* 20). As Cixous expounds, the processes of discovering and of writing or expressing the self in difference are similar to "traveling on foot and all its substitutes, all forms of transportation," to "traversing the forest, journeying through the world, using all available means of transport, using your own body as a form of transport" (*Three Steps* 64).

Gabriel, too, experiences the need to "go away, leave the [narcissistic] self" behind. Furthermore, in recovering the "magic" of and his "taste" for words (95), Gabriel now has the potential to embrace, through linguistic play, his new-found, undefinable split self. Thus, by simultaneously wishing to travel through the desert and rediscovering the pleasure of language in the above scene, Gabriel alludes to his desire to "use [his] own body as a form of transport" (Cixous, *Three Steps* 64), that is, to voice his self in difference.

*Opéra muet*'s desert voyage metaphor for the process of unearthing the divided self echoes the presentations of self-discovery previously examined in both *Un Balcon en forêt* and *La Nuit sacrée*. Indeed, the protagonist in Gracq's novel uncovers his self in difference as he meanders through a similarly labyrinthine space, the forest, and, in Ben Jelloun's text, the narrator-protagonist's voyage through the desert symbolizes her continuous narration of her self in difference. Although never physically traveling anywhere, as do the protagonists in the two previous novels, nor ever narrating his self, as the title *Opéra muet* intimates, Gabriel, nevertheless, figuratively voyages into a vast, mysterious and infinite internal space while looking at photographs.

For example, as he gazes at the pictures of the Sahara in travel brochures, Gabriel becomes entranced by a photo of a young boy laughing and holding an orange. "Il rit comme Gabriel n'a jamais vu rire un enfant, un homme. . . . Le rire de l'enfant gonfle l'écorce de l'orange, luit dans sa pulpe. Le rire de l'enfant est celui d'un djinn dont le coeur est une orange d'or et de feu cueillie dans le verger du plus beau des mirages" (97). The image of the beautiful child's laugh appears to inspire not only the protagonist's poetic imagination, as displayed in the above quote, but his feelings of otherness as well. It brings to mind Gabriel's earlier dream in which laughter signifies his unconscious other (58).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the photograph invites Gabriel to travel, simultaneously, into the past and the future, "un temps utopique," as Roland Barthes calls it, which consists of "un double mouvement que Baudelaire a chanté dans *l'Invitation au voyage*" (Barthes, *La Chambre claire* 68). As the protagonist looks at the picture, he envisions his sad childhood in the past merging with his happy childhood in the future to achieve "un temps utopique."

Le rire de l'enfant aux grands yeux noirs retentit dans le corps de Gabriel, et en appela à l'enfant qu'il fut lui-même. Mais un tel enfant, il ne fut jamais. Il était un enfant fragile, qu'un rien suffisait à porter

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<sup>14</sup>See my interpretation of the protagonist's dream in the next section, "Aesthetic Activity: An Ambiguous Process of Self-Formation."



au bord des larmes. . . . Et l'enfant qu'il avait été entendait le rire de l'enfant debout aux portes du désert, il écoutait ce rire splendide, il tombait amoureux de ce rire au goût d'orange, couleur de sable. L'enfant qu'il avait été se relevait, il traversait l'étendue de son âge, il sautait par-dessus les années; . . . par-dessus les années mortes de l'abandon, de la solitude. Il courait. L'enfant qu'il avait été courait vers l'enfant qui riait (98).

Thus, Gabriel's examination of this photo, which evokes the ringing of the child's laughter throughout his body as well as images of himself as a child running towards the laughing boy in the desert, evinces Gabriel's liberating voyage into the unknown desert, i.e., into his otherness. We are reminded of Cixous's notion of "Medusa's laugh" which connotes freedom from one's previous fear of the unconscious other ("Le Rire de la Méduse" 47).<sup>15</sup>

While slowly opening up to his internal difference as he sits in a café absorbed in his picture of the laughing boy, the protagonist meets a bizarre, older woman (99). This woman's trembling and murmuring as well as her overall strangeness "où se mêlaient l'élégance et le négligé, la violence et la vulnérabilité, la finesse et la folie" (100) immediately elicit Gabriel's sense of obligation. "Par politesse Gabriel se sentit à la fin obligé de proposer à la femme de s'asseoir" (100). Indeed, he not only invites her

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<sup>15</sup>For further analysis of Cixous's notion of "le rire de la Méduse," see Chapter 3 under the section entitled "Narrating the Other."

to sit at his table but also makes the effort, more than once, to engage her in conversation (101). The protagonist also finds himself answering to her repeated questions, i.e., to her indirect pleas that he stay, listen, and respond to her (106 and 107).

La femme n'avait cessé de marteler son récit zizagant, divagant, de cette lancinante question: 'Vous comprenez?' Elle avait martelé son histoire de cet appel, de ce cri sourd. Il ne lui suffisait pas qu'on l'écoutât, il lui fallait être comprise, être approuvée. À chaque fois Gabriel avait répondu oui" (108).

His initial surprise with regard to her strange language, to her extreme vulnerability and to her bizarre appearance (her "face"), that is, to her *otherness* eventually transforms into a sense of patience and of care.

Il la regarda étonné. Il ne comprenait décidément rien aux extravagances de cette femme qui s'entêtait à parler tout en sombrant sans cesse dans le mutisme, qui ne semblait faire aucun cas de ses interlocuteurs de hasard, et qui dans le même temps exigeait de ces étrangers une attention extrême. Et il sentait que ses divagations n'étaient pas un délire, mais une souffrance. . . . 'Je vous écoute', dit-il" (104-105).

Gabriel's response to the woman figures the role of the analyst in the talking cure as well as implies a sense of *responsibility*, as defined by Levinas.<sup>16</sup> Such a reaction to

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<sup>16</sup>Jeffrey Nealon aptly clarifies Levinas's concept of ethical *responsibility* as follows: "Ethics is born and maintained through the necessity of *response* to the other person, and such a responsiveness (which he calls "responsibility") comes necessarily *before* the solidification of any theoretical rules or political norms

the speaking other is characterized by Levinas as an ethical, liberating exchange. "L'être qui s'exprime s'impose, mais précisément en en appelant à moi de sa misère et de sa nudité--de sa faim--sans que je puisse être sourd à son appel. De sorte que, dans l'expression, l'être qui s'impose ne limite pas mais promet ma liberté, en suscitant ma bonté" (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 219). As Levinas writes elsewhere, social dialogue "has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self" (*Otherwise Than Being* 46).

Moreover, the protagonist's initial surprise and total incomprehension vis-à-vis the woman illustrate the Levinasian notion that the face-to-face experience is a pure experience, conceptless experience (Levinas, *Entre nous* 59). As Jeffrey Nealon explains, "[i]n Levinas's work, such an 'experience' of the other exceeds all my categories of knowledge and understanding" (130). As a result, Gabriel never tries to define her impenetrable face or alterity. In fact, he acknowledges and respects her ungraspable otherness when he poetically refers to her face as "une buée, une brume. Comme un léger mirage dans la chaleur des sables. Ainsi font tous les visages" (113).

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of ethical conduct" (131).

However, Gabriel is not the only one to display an ethics of alterity during this brief relation. Indeed, the woman practices "ethical saying," as Levinas refers to it, to the extent that she says and then unsays, that is, speaks in a paradoxical manner as she tells her story. For instance, she both asserts and denies having visited the desert--"'Oui... enfin non... je ne sais pas...'" (99)--and then describes her experience of the desert with a series of contradictions: "[a]vec le désert, on ne sait jamais. Si on y entre, si on y sort, si on l'aime ou si on le hait" (101); "[a]près, après, il se passe beaucoup de choses. Beaucoup d'exploits, de luttes. Après il ne se passe rien" (103). By her repeated negations, the woman focuses on the *saying* rather than the *said*, that is, on the act of signifying rather than the signified. As Levinas explains, "[l]anguage does not begin with the signs that one gives, with words. Language is above all the fact of being addressed...which means the *saying* much more than the *said*" ("The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas" 169-179) [emphasis added].

It seems that both the protagonist and the woman are never relegated either to the role of victim in need or to the position of caretaker in their relation. In fact,

throughout most of their encounter, the protagonist focuses on the woman's as well as his own hands.

Il s'était appliqué à ne fixer que leurs mains. Leurs mains à tous les deux . . . Leurs mains trop blanches, leurs mains de citadin, leurs mains d'hiver. Leurs mains dont la peau déjà se fanait, et qui à tout tremblaient, ou s'agitaient, autour des verres, autour du vide, autour des mots (109).

According to Levinas, like the face, a hand is "in search for recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something. It is going to ask you for something" ("The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas" 169). By noticing both of their hands, especially their paleness, wilted skin and trembling manner, Gabriel draws attention to their similar state of want and distress. Yet, at the same time, as their "hands wave . . . around nothingness, around words," their hands underscore the gesture to the other, the saying over the said, and thereby symbolize, at once, both their need for the other's response as well as their own ethical address or responsibility towards the other.

In this section, I have examined how this book traces the protagonist's discovery of both external and internal differences. Gabriel's acknowledgment of the external other's indescribable strangeness or "infinite face," as experienced when photographing the disappearing mural, while watching his neighbors, and, once again, during his visit to the doctor, triggers an openness to his own inner, ineffable

other. Appreciating both his own as well as others' mysterious alterity, Gabriel is able to escape his narcissistic and hermit-like existence and, in turn, to engage in an ethical relationship with an other, as evidenced in his encounter with the older woman.

### Aesthetic Activity: An Ambiguous Process of Self-Formation

Despite acknowledging and respecting the external and internal other, the protagonist continues to be depressed. He attains brief moments of respite, however, when engaging in aesthetic activity, such as when, as we have seen, he photographs the mural the night before its final disappearance and when he views the photograph of the young laughing boy. Other moments of lighthearted play and of well-being include word-play on a sign near the entrance to an apartment building. "'Gaz et eau à tous les étages'" (30) becomes, in Gabriel's imaginative playfulness, "[g]azéo, gazéo, gaze et eau, jazz et eau, gazelle haut..." (31).<sup>17</sup> Later on, he even admits to enjoy the way words sound--"[c]es derniers noms [Bellemin-Vendebout] plurent à Gabriel" (31)--as they infuse him again with poetic inspiration:

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<sup>17</sup>The sounds of the first three words on the sign instigate Gabriel's brief word-play, that is, his "processus cognitif accéléré et créatif" (Kristeva, *Soleil noir* 70).

L'adresse de ce couple était à la mesure de leurs noms-9 ter, rue du Point-du-Jour. Tandis qu'il attendait l'ascenseur, Gabriel se répétait: 'Neuf terres au point du jour', et il imaginait neuf plats pays de couleurs différentes. Neuf royaumes; les trois premiers étaient ocre, orangé et sienne clair, les trois suivants rose, carmin et violet, les trois dernières vert forêt, gris bleuté et jaune vif (31-32).

Additionally, his ludic approach to language brings back warm memories of his naive, childhood word-plays.

Cela lui rappelait les cahiers de coloriage de son enfance, les grandes boîtes de crayons et de craies de couleur. Il se souvint aussi de ce que répétait souvent sa grand-mère qui aimait toujours se lever à l'aube: 'La lumière est si belle au point du jour, les couleurs sont si tendres, fragiles... et lui comprenait 'au poing du jour" (32).

In an interview, Germain expounds on the inherent creativity in children, especially with a new foreign medium such as language.

[Les enfants] sont encore de plein pied dans le mystère et le merveilleux. Et dans l'enfance, le langage lui-même semble souvent fabuleux tant il y a de mots, d'expressions, dont les enfants ignorent le sens, et alors ils les comprennent à leur manière, loufoque et poétique (*Sylvie Germain*, 18).

Thus, Gabriel's sudden focus on sounds and repetitions of words revives his childlike "strange and poetic" linguistic play which evokes pleasurable memories and feelings.

Such instances of enjoyable language play allow Gabriel to sublimate his melancholia temporarily.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, he does

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<sup>18</sup>In Chapter One, under the section entitled "Melancholia, Aesthetic Play and the Ethical Self/Text," I discuss Kristeva's notions of art as a means to the temporary sublimation of melancholia.

not try to name the unnameable other within (an illusory because impossible practice) but rather names the unnameability of the ineffable other and, in the process, takes pleasure in playing with the other's ineffability. Moreover, Gabriel's attention to sound, i.e., to the semiotic aspect of language, as well as to meaning, or the symbolic, during his word-plays recalls Kristeva's notion of the "ethical practice" or "la négativation du narcissisme" (*Révolution* 203). In light of the poststructuralist correspondence between language and subjectivity, such moments in which the semiotic interrupts the symbolic constitute a break or crack in his narcissistic facade.

In addition to playing with words, Gabriel has three odd dreams that underscore the gradual dissipation of his self-image as unified and the essential role of language in this narcissistic devalorization. In the first, he is anxiously running through a labyrinthine city (57). The stone and concrete buildings in this city seem to suggest the stable, narcissistic self which the protagonist now tries to flee. The next dream alludes to Gabriel's castration as it presents the protagonist in front of a judge who cuts off Gabriel's hand (57-58). Castration or the "castration complex," as Freud defined it, has an "impact upon narcissism: the phallus is an essential



component of the child's self-image, so that any threat to the phallus is a radical danger to this image" (Laplanche and Pontalis 57). However, in the protagonist's dream, he does not experience fear but instead apparently accepts his castration or "narcissistic wound" (Laplanche and Pontalis 57) as he calmly watches his bloodless hand on the table. "Il voit seulement sa main, très longue et très blanche, tenant son petit doigt légèrement relevé, qui jonche la table, et son bras mutilé qui tourne dans le vide" (58).

In the last dream, Gabriel saves his life through the imaginative use of language. In order to avoid a dangerous flood, Gabriel tells a story and, in the process, is transformed into a bird, who then flies away from the threatening rising waters. "En parlant son corps s'est couvert de plumes noires où l'eau jette des reflets bleus et verts. Il remarque qu'à l'extrémité d'un de ses bras, à la place d'une main, il a une tête de corbeau. Le voilà qui s'envole" (59). The protagonist's life-saving transfiguration while telling an imaginative story, that is, while playing with language, recalls Cixous's metaphor of the writer or storyteller as a *voleur* or *voleuse* who flies/thieves through both language and his or her unconscious other to achieve a joyful self in difference.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>See Chapter One under the section entitled "Writing and Reading the Ambiguous Text: A means to a Self In

In fact, the story that Gabriel tells in his dream alludes to his unnameable unconscious other-ness. "Je vais vous raconter l'histoire de cette ville dont le nom ne pouvait ni se dire ni s'écrire car il était un certain rire d'enfant" (58). This poetic depiction of Gabriel's unconscious other as an ineffable, mysterious place parallels Zahra's spatial reference to her internal alterity as "an underground village" in *La Nuit sacrée*. Moreover, to the extent that Gabriel's unnameable city is "un certain rire d'enfant," that is, an inarticulate vocal release that expresses joy, Gabriel's story seems to acknowledge that the irrational, corporeal aspect of language or, as Kristeva calls it, the semiotic, is the only way to express internal otherness. It appears then that this final dream highlights the importance of creative language, which includes both semiotic and symbolic dimensions, in Gabriel's process of (re)discovering and taking pleasure in his self in difference.

The woman whom Gabriel engages in the café is another figure of doubling in this novel. Her depression mirrors his own,<sup>20</sup> and, like him, she seeks to name otherness. In

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Difference" for a closer examination of Cixous's depiction of the writer of difference as a *voleuse*.

<sup>20</sup>The protagonist immediately recognizes the woman's acute melancholia, her "souffrance" (105), when he first spots her at the post office. "Il y avait de la violence dans ses yeux, mais nulle expression de colère ou de méchanceté. Une violence nue, contenue au plus secret du

the post office, he watches as she reads through the phone book.

Elle faisait glisser très lentement la loupe le long des colonnes de noms, s'arrêtait parfois, plissant les yeux et le front comme si elle butait sur une grave question, un doute, ou peut-être un espoir, puis recommençait à balader sa loupe. . . . La femme recherchait un nom, un nom dont sa vie semblait dépendre. Cela suffit à rendre fou (90-91).

The protagonist further notes that her face is "marqué par l'insomnie" (91). Just as he suffers from insomnia and searches for a glimpse of the mysterious other in his neighbors' faces, the woman also does not sleep and searches for the lost (m)other in lists of names in phone books. Gabriel eventually realizes that her long narration, like her daily habit of reading phone books, represents a quest for identity and meaning. "Il devinait qu'elle cherchait désespérément des mots, des images, des exemples, à la mesure du tourment qui la hantait. Tout comme elle recherchait un nom introuvable dans les pages des annuaires" (105).

It is the search, however, that counts for the woman who recognizes the impossibility of naming the unnameable other, a process which she metaphorizes as exile in the desert.

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coeur. La violence d'un chagrin que rien, personne, n'avait su venir consoler" (90).

'[a]vec le désert, on ne sait jamais. On croit y être parvenu, on n'est encore qu'à son seuil. On croit être à ses confins, on est à sa lisière. On croit que l'on va sortir, on est perdu en son cœur. Mais, de toute façon, quoi que l'on fasse, on s'y perd toujours. Enfin, nous autres. Nous autres, les gens d'Europe, les Blancs des villes' (99-100).

The woman's reference to the difficulty experienced by "les gens d'Europe, les Blancs des villes" in attempting to comprehend the desert points to the typically narcissistic Westerner's troublesome existence in a state of difference, i.e., traveling through the desert.

In describing her narrative process as an incessant wandering through the desert--"[l]'histoire finit quand elle commence. C'est comme le désert'" (103), the woman intimates the need for patience during self-discovery.<sup>21</sup> Her storytelling also contrasts with Gabriel's extremely brief word-plays which last no longer than a few seconds. The woman's playful and interminable fiction allows for the sustaining of an open self in difference. "Il lui fallait [à la femme] jeter son passé le sombre éclat d'une épopée, rare et splendide. Il lui fallait creuser, creuser sans fin dans sa mémoire, dans son amour et sa douleur--creuser des millénaires à rebours" (107). Regularly reinventing and telling her epic narrative of Endiku and Shamhat to

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<sup>21</sup>Highlighting, once again, the importance of patience, this scene recalls Gabriel's earlier religious experience waiting for the coming of the Other.

strangers, the woman darkly illuminates ("jeter un sombre éclat") her past and self. However, as the paradoxical "somber shine" conveys, her melancholic creative language never clearly elucidates her past nor her ambiguous self. Nevertheless, with calm endurance, she persists storytelling and, in the process, keeps her suffering at bay.

The protagonist is transformed by her long, bizarre story and finds himself immediately after in a pleasant but "confuse, étrange rêverie. 'Une buée, un mirage...'" (114) "Il ne savait plus trop s'il rêvait ou marchait éveillé" (114). Indeed, he is surprised by "son état de torpeur, de rêverie, sa lente dérive dans les remous des mots qu'avait semés la femme. À son enlissement dans la voix un peu rauque de Shamhat--voix de sable" (115). Moreover, the woman's otherness becomes, in Gabriel's eyes, "un mirage levé au coeur, non du désert, mais du seul mot désert" (114). It appears then that listening to her "voix de sable" or to her "mot de désert," that is, to her bizarre language, alternating between semiotic otherness and symbolic meaning, brings about Gabriel's own "strange," dream-like feelings or what Kristeva calls the *inquiétante étrangeté*.

Indeed, to the extent that the woman's attempt to signify her divided self renders her language ambiguous, repetitive, and, consequently, unsettling, her story

exemplifies what I call a "revolutionary narrative." Revolutionary stories qualify under Kristeva's definition of "disturbing tales" which, she contends, always evoke strange or uncanny feelings in the reader or listener. According to Kristeva, the experience of the uncanny, i.e., of the ambivalent encounter of that which is simultaneously familiar and strange, in turn, intimates the reader's or listener's revived sense of unconscious otherness as well as the concomitant destruction of his or her narcissistic self or *moi*. Kristeva asserts, "*l'inquiétante étrangeté est une destruction du moi qui peut . . . s'inscrire comme ouverture à l'incongru. Retour d'un refoulé familier, certes, l'Unheimliche n'en nécessite pas moins l'impulsion d'une rencontre nouvelle avec un extérieur inattendu*" (*Étrangers* 278).<sup>22</sup> It appears then that, to the extent that the woman's disturbing revolutionary story evokes Gabriel's "strange" or uncanny feelings, Gabriel undergoes a renewed sense of familiar otherness--"un refoulé familier"--that is, an opening up to the unfamiliar ("*l'incongru*"). Thus, it is not just the human other's, that is, the woman's "extérieur

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<sup>22</sup>Chapter One offers a close examination of Kristeva's notion of aesthetic activity and the uncanny experience as well as of my depiction of a "revolutionary narrative" in the section entitled "Writing and Reading the Ambiguous Self: A Means to a Self In Difference."

inattendu" but also that of the textual other--her story--that heighten his self in difference.

Yet, as soon as he leaves the warmth of the café and the "exile" in the desert afforded by the woman's story, Gabriel "ressen[t] un bref coup au coeur . . . [l]e choc du froid" and, as a result, "fut arraché à son état de torpeur" (115). More specifically, as Gabriel walks through the city, the city as emblem of mastery, of defenses, and of rigidity returns to haunt him.

La ville reprenait ses droits. Ses droits de dureté, de hâte, d'âpreté. Elle se dressait autour de lui avec ses façades, ses voitures, ses panneaux et ses feux; avec ses innombrables remparts de pierre, de vitres, de métal, de néons. Il n'était plus à nouveau qu'un homme minime qui se dépêchait de rentrer à son logis (116).

The city's cold, structural "dureté" "de pierre, de vitres, de métal, de néon" reawakens Gabriel's narcissistic self-image, returning him to the comfortable, reclusive life of "un homme minime" and suppresses his desire to adventure into the enigmatic desert or the mysterious "space" of his self in difference. "[I]l avait épuisé le sursis qu'il s'était accordé--partir à l'aventure, changer d'espace, de regard" (116).

However, as he returns home, the protagonist sees a fruit vendor with a crate of oranges which instantly reminds Gabriel of the picture of the young boy laughing with an orange in his hand. "Une pyramide d'oranges plantée sur le

bord du trottoir. L'image s'engouffra dans les yeux de Gabriel. . . . [L]'enfant radieux venait de se précipiter hors de l'oubli, de l'attraper au collet" (117).

Remembering his nascent pleasurable sense of alterity as he looked at this photo featuring an orange, the oranges now become symbolic of art and its potential to incite a sense of rebirth. Thus, the oranges break down the city's narcissistic hold or "rights" over his self-perspective. "La pyramide d'oranges s'élevait entre les remparts de la ville, les écartait, les repoussait. Les faisait éclater. La ville d'un coup deserra son étreinte, perdit ses droits" (116-117).

It follows then that, after buying and subsequently surrounding himself with the crate of oranges in his room, Gabriel no longer watches others outside his window, but rather makes a conscious effort to focus on the oranges, the emblems of aesthetic activity. "Il allait laisser son regard se reposer quelques jours à l'intérieur de sa chambre, se reposer dans la contemplation des oranges" (124-125). Following the woman's example, the protagonist, it seems, purposely tries to revive and to sustain his sense of otherness. Gazing at the oranges, in fact, immediately appears to encourage his photographic activity insofar as he begins to develop the photographs of the mural. In so doing, "[a]ussitôt il fut saisi, comme à chaque fois qu'il



commençait ses tirages, par les mêmes tourments de doute, d'impatience, de bonheur et d'étonnement" (125). Such contradictory feelings while he creates these photographic images convey, once again, the uncanniness of the unthinkable, characteristic of all unsettling aesthetic activity. Moreover, the depiction of Gabriel developing the pictures of a lost object, i.e., the mural, suggests that he actively tries to unearth the ungraspable, lost other, always oscillating between presence and absence.

Son art devenait délicate alchimie où se transmuait peu à peu le visible qui, d'abord arraché à sa matière et à son lieu, s'arrachait encore à l'obscurité où il s'était tapi pour resurgir dans une lumière seconde et prendre pose entre l'éternité et la durée, le vif et le factice, la présence et l'absence" (125-126).

In contrast to this creative process that digs into his internal alterity, Gabriel's past valorization of his narcissistic state, he now understands, fostered a stagnant, painful existence which he calls his "blessure."

Blessure du temps que Gabriel n'avait pas vu passer, blessure des jours au fil desquels s'était usée lentement sa jeunesse sans crier gare, ni quoi que ce soit d'autre d'ailleurs. . . . Blessure d'un corps rejeté sur la grève de la plus grise solitude, dans les sables amers du désir déchu de ses droits de jouissance. Blessure d'un amour de mer et d'un amour d'une femme qui tour à tour l'avaient trahi, laissé en déshérence (127).

The repetition of "blessure," which Kristeva also employs when referring to "le dépressif [...] blessé" (*Soleil noir* 20), along with memories of his inactivity, of his lack of

*jouissance*, of his feelings of rejection from the *mer-mère*, and of his Nervalian melancholic sense of "disinheritance," all point to the sad realization of his melancholic, *passive* existence thus far. Nonetheless, as we have just examined, his present artistic activity finally liberates him from his previous narcissistic *passivity* to the extent that it not only enhances but also helps *maintain* his sense of inner difference.

Yet, during his photographic activity, Dr. Pierre's face and especially his "feminine" mouth in the photos, at one point, remind him of those of his deceased grandmother. Indeed, Dr. Pierre's face and mouth suddenly present Gabriel with an image that conflates his lost (m)other or rather (grandm)other with death. "Il s'étonna de n'avoir jamais remarqué cette ressemblance. Il continua à développer ses photos dans le trouble de cette révélation, s'attachant à dépister à chaque tirage de nouveaux signes de ressemblance" (130). In light of Levinas's definition of the other's face as ineffable alterity, as "exposing death" ("Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" 24), the protagonist's frantic search for another glimpse of the (grandm)other's face in the photos of the recently deceased Dr. Pierre becomes an attempt to pinpoint, to grasp the otherness of death.

In fact, in *La Chambre claire*, Roland Barthes claims that photography presents death without catharsis (141). Ironically, as photography attempts to conserve the memory of life, Barthes goes on to say, it, nevertheless, confronts the unguarded viewer with the unknown, with death.

[L]a mort, dans une société, il faut bien qu'elle soit quelque part; si elle n'est plus (ou est moins) dans le religieux, elle doit être ailleurs: peut-être dans cette image qui produit la Mort en voulant conserver la vie. Contemporaine du recul des rites, la Photographie correspondrait peut-être à l'intrusion, dans notre société moderne, d'une Mort asymbolique, hors religion, hors rituel, sorte de plongée brusque dans la Mort littérale. *La vie/la Mort*: le paradigme se réduit à un simple déclic, celui qui sépare la pose initiale du papier final (Barthes, *La Chambre claire* 144-45).

Thus, Gabriel's surprise while developing the photos and his subsequent frenetic attempt to comprehend the otherness of death displays "l'intrusion . . . d'une Mort asymbolique," his "sorte de plongée dans la Mort littérale." Indeed, Gabriel's study of the photos is fruitless given that the photos cannot represent death nor even sublimate his fear of death through religious or fictional elaboration, that is, through symbolic substitution.

Mais ce visage ne se fixait sur aucun des clichés suspendus au long du fil à linge; il semblait résulter de l'ensemble, flotter comme une brume autour des images, hésiter au bord de chacune. Par cette superimpression tremblée de visages, la série de portraits se faisait déchirure d'un suaire s'ouvrant sur la disparition de la face dont il avait pris trace (130-131).

As the above scene conveys, Gabriel's detailed examination of the pictures becomes akin to "ripping open the shroud" of the dead other only to find nothing, the face's "disappearance." Nevertheless, Gabriel remains riveted to his photos sensing his imminent grasp of the truth, of the ineffable other, i.e. of death. "Gabriel restait là, debout devant ses photos . . . devant le visage de sa grand-mère qui ne cessait d'osciller entre une disparition toujours inachevée mais incessamment à l'oeuvre, et l'absolu de l'absence. Il restait là retenu par une force aussi douce que douloureuse, le coeur tourmenté par une curiosité" (131). To the extent that photography records something or someone that has since disappeared or is now dead, this art, Barthes observes, easily tricks the viewer into a false hope of discovering the truth of death. Barthes expounds,

[l]a photographie justifie ce désir, même si elle ne le comble pas: je ne puis avoir l'espoir fou de découvrir la vérité, que parce que le noème de la Photo, c'est précisément que cela a été, et que je vis dans l'illusion qu'il suffit de nettoyer la surface de l'image, pour accéder à ce qu'il y a derrière: scruter veut dire retourner la photo, entrer dans la profondeur du papier, atteindre sa face inverse (ce qui est caché est pour nous, Occidentaux, plus 'vrai' que ce qui est visible). Hélas, j'ai beau scruter, je ne découvre rien... je n'obtiens que ce seul savoir, possédé depuis longtemps, dès mon premier coup d'oeil: que cela a effectivement été (*La Chambre claire* 156).

Suffering from "l'espoir fou de découvrir la vérité" vis-à-vis his photos, Gabriel eventually scrutinizes the images to find what lies behind them.

Alors il commença de nouveaux tirages, puis accomplit des aggrandissements de détails, effectua des retouches, s'ingénia même à la fin à glisser des trucages. Mais le sourire n'avouait rien; . . . Le visage du Docteur Pierre ainsi retouché régressait à l'état de masque, son sourire remanié se distordait jusqu'au rictus (138-139).

Subsequently, the protagonist finally admits "une impossible ressemblance" (139). His desperate quest to see, i.e., to know, the unknowable otherness of death through these photographs results in frustration and in his concomitant rejection of all forms of representation. Realizing that it is "impossible" for either art or language to capture the ineffable, Gabriel ceases his photography and instead silently plays with his shadows, gesticulating like a mime (134). In so doing, he slowly reverts into an acute state of melancholia.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the protagonist starts to imagine himself falling into "[l]a bouche, immense cavité emplie d'ombres en feu, d'humides rousseurs et de soleils fondus" (135), a

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<sup>23</sup>The movement of regression is echoed throughout the text as the novel's earlier imagery drawn from the *New Testament*, such as the Christ-like mural, reverts back to imagery from the *Old Testament*, which include allusions to Aaron and to the wandering Israelites in the desert, later in the novel.

space which alludes to the maternal womb. Such images of his return to the womb--the descent "dans les pénombres du corps . . . s'enfonçant dans la mer [mère]" (135)--suggest the melancholic's illusory and fatal reunification with the indescribable maternal Thing or (m)other, as posited by Kristeva in *Soleil noir* and by André Green in *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort*.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, Gabriel loses himself in an indescribable body (the imaginary (m)other) by reaching the "vide" that, according to Green, symbolizes the negative narcissist's psychic death.

Gabriel descendait maintenant les degrés sans fin d'un escalier de glaise rougeoyante qui le conduisait à l'intérieur du corps, mais il ne savait pas quel était le nom, le visage de ce corps au fond duquel il descendait ainsi. . . . Et soudain il se sentit perdu dans le vide de ce corps sans visage et sans nom, roué de nuit et de silence, et la glaise s'amollit, devint boue, et il s'enlisait dans de la vase (137).

This overwhelming sense of semiotic otherness, as he imagines himself wallowing in "clay"-like uterine flesh, "roué de nuit et de silence" appears to repress, painfully, his symbolic self, that is, his rational and social characteristics. In fact, he loses his desire as well as his speech insofar as "dead kisses" and a "loss of words" and "of names" leaves him with a bitter taste in his mouth.

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<sup>24</sup>See my lengthy discussion of Kristeva's and Green's notions of the melancholic's psychic demise in Chapter Two under the section entitled "The Writer, Reader, and Text In Difference."

"Sa bouche avait un goût amer, presque aigre--celui des baisers morts, des mots perdus, des sourires disparus, des noms volés, des souffles tus" (136). Moreover, given the phonetic similarity between *goût amer* and *goût à mère*, his sour taste, in this last quote, intimates his sense of reincorporation into the maternal Thing. Soon after, Gabriel becomes fixated on an image of a muddy, reflectionless pond, "un étang," (136-37) which again underscores his fall into the maternal abyss of semiotic otherness or psychosis, decidedly away from his narcissistic or egoist self.

This detailed depiction of the protagonist's psychic demise continues until the end of the novel wherein Gabriel lies immobile in bed, in a hallucinatory state.

Les heures passaient, tantôt comme des secondes, tantôt comme des années. L'espace autour de lui ne cessait de se transformer. Les murs se rapprochaient. Gabriel regardait les murs et le plafond de sa chambre avec effroi. Allait-il être emmuré vivant? Il voulut appeler à l'aide, mais il ne parvint qu'à porter à l'aigu les sifflements qui chuintaient de sa poitrine (147).

His immobility, fear of being buried alive, and inability to speak create the unmistakable image of a melancholic body numbed into psychic inertia, reminiscent of the closing scene in Gracq's *Un Balcon*. As Kristeva explains, the melancholic oftentimes "se réfugie jusqu'à l'inaction, jusqu'à faire le mort ou jusqu'à la mort elle-même" (*Soleil*

noir 20). Furthermore, the protagonist imagines himself reuniting with his former lover, Agathe, whose image often merges with those of his deceased (grandm)other and of la mer/mère throughout the text. "Agathe enjambe le balcon, elle saute dans la nuit, elle vient à ma rencontre..." (148) In fact, the last word that he utters, "sourire," (150) brings to mind Gabriel's earlier image of the mouth as womb into which he returns, thereby underscoring, one final time, his fatal reunification with the unsayable other. The text's closing paragraph further points to the protagonist's apparent psychic death instigated by his aesthetic activity insofar as it displays Gabriel engrossed with the oranges, the emblems of art, as he falls into psychic inertia. "Les oranges tout autour de lui, dans le lit et sur le plancher, cessèrent de bourdonner. Les coeurs d'oranges se turent. Le monde entier des choses et des êtres se retira loin de ces paupières d'écorce" (150).

Despite offering a less indecisive ending than those found in Gracq's and Ben Jelloun's two novels, Germain's text parallels both of these other novels to the extent that it presents narcissism and melancholia as negative and positive processes in self-formation. Yet, unlike *Un Balcon* and *La Nuit sacrée*, *Opéra muet* also highlights art's ambiguous effects on the artist and audience. Earlier in



this chapter, we saw how the Dr. Pierre mural, at first, fosters the protagonist's detrimental self-absorption. The last two sections, however, point to the beneficial influence of art insofar as the protagonist experiences an opening up to the internal as well as to the external other during artistic activity. For instance, while Gabriel listens to the woman's fragmented and circular "revolutionary narrative" or text/self in difference, he undergoes a heightened, pleasurable sense of alterity within and an appreciation of the human other as well. He again enjoys a self in difference when he returns to his apartment and starts to develop his photographs. Yet, while looking at his photos, Gabriel suddenly confronts the indecipherable enigma of death. This surprising hallucinatory vision of the unknowable other incites what Germain refers to, in an interview, as the artist's

problème essentiel, celui du désir de voir, de voir par-delà les apparences, de franchir les limites du visible, du connu, et d'éprouver des sensations et émotions, totalement extra-ordinaires, d'accéder à un degré ultime de la connaissance. Mais ces artistes en mal d'inspiration, par impatience ou vanité, en toute inconscience surtout, ne mesurent pas le danger qu'il y a à entrer trop brutalement, sans préparation ni progression, au coeur dans un mystère bien trop puissant pour eux (Sylvie Germain 12).

Forgetting the woman's earlier advice to remain, always, patient during revolutionary aesthetic activity, Gabriel displays his *impatience* as he continues to manipulate his

photos in a desperate attempt to enter "au coeur d'un mystère bien trop puissant." Consequently, his feverish need to see, i.e., to comprehend, the other through photography eventually leads to his repudiation of the symbolic and thus to his psychic demise. As Germain goes on to say, "je pense qu'on ne peut pas avoir accès à certaines intensités de vision sans risquer l'équilibre de sa raison. La tentation n'en demeure pas moins toujours lancinante et vivace" (*Sylvie Germain* 13). Indeed, as Gabriel lies in bed at the end of the novel, he hallucinates himself floating in a "lumière pure" which, according to Germain, represents the fatal "vision nue de l'absolu" (13).

Thus, Germain's novel warns against the artistic quest to envision the irrepresentable much like the Bible cautions that "nul homme, fût-ce le plus grand des prophètes, ne peut voir Dieu et garder la vie" (*Germain, Sylvie Germain* 13). Moreover, the opening page of the novel, which serves as preamble, forbodes the protagonist's photographic (visual) hallucination of the unknowable and his resultant fall into semiotic otherness or "fatale étourderie." "Et s'il lui arriva de devenir un peu voyant, ce fut par pure inadvertance. Mais l'excès d'attention est parfois fatale étourderie" (13). In fact, the circle which surrounds all of the text on the first page, including the preceding

quotation, alludes to the mouth, womb or abyss into which the protagonist's self\text eventually falls.

Like narcissism and melancholia, aesthetic activity may either help or hinder the discovery of a self in difference. Art, at one point, leads to Gabriel's uncovering of a self in difference; but, at other times, it either reinforces his narcissistic self, who thus remains closed to the internal and external other, or, conversely, overemphasizes his feelings of semiotic otherness, thereby instigating psychosis. Aesthetic activity, as Germain alleges in an interview and thematizes in *Opéra muet*, functions as either a "digue," a literal "garde-fou," "c'est-à-dire une protection contre la folie," or as a detonator "dynamis[ant] ces forces intérieures" (Sylvie Germain 12-13). Moreover, as Germain's novel points out, it is only when the protagonist's aesthetic activity maintains what Kristeva defines as an *ethical* balance between the semiotic and the symbolic aspects of the self that art serves as a "digue" not just against psychosis but against a narcissistic self-same enclosure as well.

#### The Text As An Opening To The Other

In addition to symbolizing the mouth, womb or maternal otherness with which the protagonist reunites towards the

end of the novel, the initial page's typography, which entails text within a circle, also appears to emblemize the novel as camera or telescope lens through which the actual reader<sup>25</sup> looks at the protagonist. Just as Gabriel keeps vigil over his neighbors through the use of binoculars and construes their actions, the reader of this novel is invited to decipher Gabriel's actions, that is, the text. This novel alludes to reading as a kind of seeing or watching of events through a lens that precludes a clear perception of the story, in other words, that thwarts one's mastery of the narrative. Indeed, the abundance of metaphors and ambiguous language creates an enigmatic text that demands the reader's involvement. Furthering this metaphor of the book as the lens which the reader must constantly adjust to keep focusing on the story, the text is divided not into chapters but rather into twenty-four *séquences*, which intimate not only the divisions of a film instead of a book but, in particular, the repetition of cinematic takes of a single event. The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines *sequence* as "[a] passage in a film consisting of several shots dealing with a single event or theme" (2782). Moreover, the slowly disappearing

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<sup>25</sup>I use the term *actual reader* to distinguish it from *implied reader*.

building displaying images and language, i.e., graffiti, serves as a *mise-en-abyme* for Germain's book which similarly undoes itself as we read, thereby always necessitating our efforts to reconstruct it.

Preventing the comfortable consumption and effortless comprehension of the narrative characteristic of what Barthes calls the *texte de plaisir*, this novel qualifies instead as a *texte de jouissance*. Increasingly cryptic, especially towards the end, *Opéra muet*'s images become confusing, eliciting the reader's frustration and struggle with the text, which, according to Barthes, signals the momentary, blissful loss of self, revealing "un sujet . . . clivé" (*Le Plaisir du texte* 26). Thus, *Opéra muet*'s potential to heighten the self in difference and, in so doing, to undermine one's narcissistic self-perception render it an ethical text, as defined by Kristeva.<sup>26</sup> It appears then that the circle on the first page also intimates the ubiquitous, magical oranges, the symbols of art, throughout the novel which, in effect, mirror the text as art object with the capability to incite a self in difference.

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<sup>26</sup>See Chapter 1, in the section "The Revolutionary Text In Difference," for an analysis of Kristeva's definition of an ethical text or practice.

While providing a way to thematize internal otherness, Germain's novel functions as a means to acknowledge the ineffable Other or God. The novel's partition into sequences also brings to mind the ecclesiastical and musical definitions of *sequence*. The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* further describes *sequence* as "a liturgical chant or hymn" and as "[t]he repetition of a phrase or melody at a higher or lower pitch" (2782). In fact, throughout the text, there appear many repetitions of words that mimic the rhythm and syntax of prayers, of liturgies or of religious musical refrains. "Le choc du froid. . . . Le choc du jour. . . . Le choc de la rue. . . . Le choc de la solitude" (115). "Glaïse tendre et malléable, glaïse nue et lumineuse. Glaïse où toujours se relève la torpeur" (135). "Quelqu'un là-bas. . . . Quelqu'un tuait le temps. . . . Quelqu'un trompait sa peur. . . . Quelqu'un attendait, nuit après nuit; attendait sans savoir quoi. Quelqu'un attendait, qui n'avait plus rien ni personne à attendre" (67). It follows then that the book's twenty-four sequences along with the various refrain-like repetitions in the text may, additionally, imply that this novel serves as a "liturgical chant or hymn," addressing or glorifying the unsayable Other. Indeed, the persistent theme of patience and of waiting, as the last quote above highlights, alludes to the

religious expectation of the coming of the Messiah. The protagonist's name, moreover, recalls the Biblical archangel, Gabriel, who announces the birth of the Christian Messiah, Jesus.<sup>27</sup> As Germain admits in an interview, her work can "be described . . . as a search for God" ("Sylvie Germain - Interview," 13).

Yet, while Gabriel's name intimates his symbolic function as the messenger of God, his profession, photography, paradoxically, designates his role as an "agen[t] de la Mort" (Barthes, *La Chambre claire* 144). Indeed, wanting to conserve his memory of the mural, Gabriel's photographic images of Dr. Pierre, on the contrary, only confront him with death. Furthermore, the novel's title *Opéra muet*, which in the text symbolizes the

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In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, with a message for a girl betrothed to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David; the girl's name was Mary. The angel went in and said to her, "Greetings, most favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was deeply troubled by what he said and wondered what this greeting could mean. Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for God has been gracious to you; you will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called Son of The Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel for ever; his reign shall never end. 'How can this be?' said Mary. 'I am still a virgin.'" The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; for that reason the holy child to be born will be called the son of God.' (*Oxford Study Bible*, Luke 1:26 - 1:35, 1328).

theatrical death or, more specifically, the spectacular destruction of Dr. Pierre, "mort sans mot, dans un fracas d'orchestre discordant sous le regard de centaines de témoins muets" (61-62), also alludes to the silent, wordless art of *photography* which in Latin would be called "*imago lucis opera expressa*" (Barthes, *La Chambre claire* 127) (emphasis added). Thus, in tracing Gabriel's psychic demise, *Opéra muet* becomes a series or a *sequence* of photographs of Gabriel that situates the actual reader vis-à-vis death, yet another unknowable other. Aware that her books are, as Germain herself asserts, "des sortes de messagers" to her readers (*Sylvie Germain* 17), Germain encourages her readers in *Opéra muet* to remain always cautiously open to or rather patiently respectful of the ineffable other, be it the unconscious other, the human other, God or death.



## CONCLUSION

Presenting ambiguous language, imagery and plots as they depict depressed, self-enclosed, indifferent protagonists, the three novels examined in this dissertation could easily be construed as anti-social, unethical and meaningless textual play, typical, as some argue, of much (post)modern literature. However, as we have seen, in *Un Balcon en forêt*, *La Nuit sacrée* and *Opéra muet*, the textual indeterminacy as well as the focus on the ambivalent self in stages of narcissism, melancholia and aesthetic play reveal instead that these texts practice and thematize, respectively, an ethical opening to the other in its variant forms.

More specifically, the novels, on the one hand, exemplify *texts in difference* where textual ambiguities highlight both meaning and its negation or disruption. This double language, a dialectic of the Symbolic (language as the linguistic social code) and the semiotic (language as the unconscious other) reflects the analogous struggle in the speaking, writing and/or reading subject.

On the other hand, the texts offer meditations on the self in difference in their portrayals of characters who (re)discover their divided psychic state and who learn to respect the human other's alterity. Each narrative fiction presents its protagonist's path to ethical becoming, that is, to appreciating the internal and external incomprehensible other, as a complex process ranging from violent, narcissistic rejection to joyful, playful acceptance with an interim state of deep melancholic sadness. Whereas the three novels trace similar means to embrace the ineffable other within and without, they, nevertheless, underscore different aspects of an ethics of alterity.

Gracq's *Un Balcon* focuses on play, not only textual but also childlike physical play, as a way to enhance and to enjoy the self in difference. While also underscoring the pleasurable (re)discovery of internal and external differences through playful aesthetic activity as well as through loving relations, Ben Jelloun's *La Nuit* additionally discusses and displays respect for the social other, in particular, the sexual and cultural other. Differing from the two other novels, Germain's *Opéra muet* highlights artistic play as an ambivalent practice that may just as easily incite either ethical becoming or psychic death. As

long as the creative self avoids the temptation to define otherness which, like God and death, always remains unknowable and irrepresentable, he or she has the potential to embrace and sustain difference.

Given that these three texts were written in the latter half of the twentieth century, one may ask if there is a shared historical impetus that would explain why they repeatedly address and engage in various means to appreciate the undefinable other. Perhaps, these narrative works warn against our tendency, in light of the late twentieth century's technological advancements, to assume that we comprehend everything, including our internal and external differences, which can only bring about the leveling of our differences into sameness. Moreover, if we consider the specific historical context in which each of the novels was written, these narrative texts, it seems, promote French society's openness to and respect for the colonized and/or immigrant other during the last forty years. Bearing in mind that *Un Balcon* was published in 1958, during and/or just after the North African nations' struggles for independence from France, we note that the text's depiction of the German invasion of France during World War II is strikingly analogous to the French presence in North Africa. Indeed, historian Antoine Prost posits an interesting

connection between France's experience during World War II and the French government's position against North African nations' liberation during the 1950s and early 1960s. According to Prost, shameful memories of the Second World War gave rise to the French government's insistence on remaining in a position of power over North Africa. "Pour les hommes politiques de la IVe [République], élevés dans la mystique impériale de l'entre-deux-guerres et marqués par la lâcheté française face à l'Allemagne hitlérienne, agir autrement semblerait un inconcevable 'abandon'" (65). If one realizes that Gracq presents France's dread and suffering vis-à-vis the German invasion in a text published at the height of the Franco-Algerian War, one cannot help but think of the similarity between World-War-II France's position and that of colonial Algeria and, concomitantly, of the French government's ironic role reversal as invaders less than twenty years later. Indeed, the destroyed fort in Gracq's novel may also refer to the crumbling colonizing French empire during the 1950s, in particular, to the fall of the *IVe République* and the ensuing decolonization of and germinating respect for cultural others.

Immigrating from Morocco to France in 1971, Ben Jelloun soon thereafter obtained a doctorate in psychiatric social work at which time he counseled fellow North African

immigrants. As a result, many of his works, including his novels *La Réclusion solitaire* and *Les Yeux baissés*, his published dissertation *La Plus haute des solitudes*, as well as a series of articles in *Le Monde*, recount late-twentieth-century North African immigrant experiences in France. Although not depicting an immigrant life, *La Nuit sacrée* ironically becomes the one novel *par excellence* that highlights the contemporary immigrant presence in France insofar as in 1987 it won the *Prix Goncourt*, the most prestigious literary prize in France. Recognized as the best novel published in France that year, *La Nuit*, a text with an undeniable Arabic cultural presence and the first novel written by a Francophone author from one of France's former North African colonies to receive the *Prix Goncourt*, thus points to France's appreciation of otherness within its own institutions, that is, within its own borders.

One may also read Germain's *Opéra muet* as a reference to France's growing immigrant population and its related beneficial effect on French identity. Indeed, the self-reflecting mural with which the protagonist identifies in this text may additionally intimate France's past self-image composed of a comforting social sameness prior to its post-colonial increased immigration. However, after the workers, who speak in a *foreign* language, destroy the dilapidated

building and its mesmerizing mural, the fragmented mural alludes to the end of France's self-same illusion and represents, rather, France's contemporary multi-cultural, multi-ethnic make-up. Similar to the protagonist who, once the mirror-like mural disappears, yearns to travel to North Africa (the land of a large majority of immigrants in France) and to be immersed in a different culture, France, Germain's novel seems to suggest, now also starts on its own figurative journey into otherness, embracing its new cultural others.

The above additional interpretations of the three novels prove, once again, that these works are indeed texts in difference, always eliciting multiple readings and thereby undermining the direct statement of as well as the reading of a single moral message which, according to Kristeva, "est déjà la suppression de la fonction éthique telle que nous l'entendons" (*Révolution* 203). My use of various, perhaps seemingly incompatible, theorists in my analysis of the novels contributed, moreover, to my reading of difference. Indeed, each of the novels presents diverse approaches to alterity that necessitate varied interpretations of an ethics of the other. Kristeva's and Barthes's textual and psychoanalytic notions, Levinas's

phenomenological views, and Cixous'<sup>1</sup> as well as Irigaray's concern with sexual difference, all helped elucidate the multifarious instances of an ethics of alterity depicted in the three novels.

Perhaps the most questionable juxtaposition of theorists of ethics employed in this dissertation is that of Kristeva and Levinas, given their seemingly conflicting ideas on language and ethics. Levinas promotes speaking to the other but specifically underscores the act of *saying* over what is *said*. In other words, the social approach to the other is what Levinas values. Always referring to the other as "mysterious" and "ineffable," Levinas never suggests that we define the other's alterity through language. Rather, he simply declares our need to respect and to be responsible towards the other through a communicative proximity, i.e., through an acknowledgment and embrace of the incomprehensible other by way of linguistic communication. Kristeva's ideas on language and the other also focus on the act of *saying* but with an added psychoanalytic perspective. Creative and playful speaking and writing, wherein the semiotic interrupts the symbolic,

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<sup>1</sup>Not surprisingly, the three theorists, whose work on an ethics of alterity to which I most refer throughout the dissertation, all immigrated to France. Indeed, Levinas, Kristeva, and Cixous were born and grew up in, respectively, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Algeria.

contends Kristeva, display an openness to one's own internal otherness which, in turn, encourages an ethical approach to the external other's unsayable strangeness. However, she also considers what is said as equally essential to maintaining an ethics of the other. Indeed, Kristeva warns against the inclination to define the unnameable aspect of the other which would linguistically neutralize difference into sameness. Yet, as Ewa Ziarek perceptively points out, Kristeva articulates that which is already understood in Levinas's notions of ethics and language. Given that, throughout his writings, he insists that we revere the divine-like ungraspable quality of the other, Levinas, in effect, implies both the futility of trying to name the unnameable other and the violence against the other that such naming would represent. Both Levinas and Kristeva therefore appear to point to the importance of language as a means to an ethical existence so long as the other's irrepresentable alterity is always respected.

Most importantly, in addition to a mixed theoretical approach, the apparently incongruous combination of novels in this dissertation further highlights the fruitful consideration of difference. Indeed, I examine texts that range from the mid- to the late twentieth century and that are written by male and female as well as French and



Francophone authors. The very incongruity, which has been remarked upon by many with whom I have spoken in French literary studies, in fact, makes my point. The inclusion of difference in a variety of categories in this dissertation calls attention to the discipline's inclination to compartmentalize the study of texts written in French. Indeed, the critical examination of literature in French in departments of French as well as in scholarly writings, more often than not, separate the study of male writers from female writers and, more recently, of French authors from Francophone authors. Although the separate readings of texts written by Francophone authors, like those by women writers, continue to be an essential way to underscore what was historically absent in the discipline, we should now also begin to increase courses and analyses that consider texts by both French and Francophone writers, as is already being done with regard to works by both male and female authors. The equal integration rather than the compartmentalization of differences in the study of literature in French would evidence a true openness to and full embrace of otherness that could only generate exciting and novel interpretations and discussions. Analyzing the ethical self and text in difference by examining the notion of the other in its many manifestations in three disparate novels in French with the aid of a variety of theoretical

lenses, this dissertation exemplifies such an attempt to remain open to and to appreciate difference at all levels.

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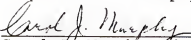


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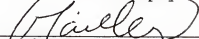
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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
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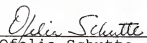
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